

Civic Engagement in an Older America



FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY REPORT 2005 White House Conference on Aging Civic Engagement in an Older America

Project Overview

In 2004, GSA received a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to launch “Civic Engagement in an Older America,” a five-year initiative to stimulate research leading to the development of programs and policies that will increase civic participation among older adults. One of the Project’s first activities was to convene a series of forums and focus groups in conjunction with the 2005 White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA). The forums gathered input from a diverse group of professionals and stakeholders, including corporate leaders, researchers, government officials, and community representatives.

The focus groups collected opinions from older adults in three age cohorts: leading-edge boomers (50-59 year-olds); 60-69 year-olds; and adults 70 and older. Twelve focus groups were held in February and March 2005 in eight locations in Florida, Missouri, and Arizona. An online focus group was also conducted in late March-early April 2005.

Greg O’Neill is Director of GSA’s *Civic Engagement in an Older America* project, goneill@agingsociety.org. This summary report was prepared by Doris Reeves-Lipscomb, focus groups facilitator, groupsthatwork@knology.net. It speaks only to the focus group findings. A complete discussion of methodology, community partners, focus group questions and participant

framework, are contained in the Appendices of the full report.

Civic Engagement Definitions

Across all focus groups, civic engagement was defined to include five core elements. These included volunteering; being involved in political processes; working for the community good; assisting and participating in various education systems; and working to sustain and strengthen neighborhoods. A second tier of ideas included financial contributions to charitable causes; protecting the environment; and improving the quality of life for disadvantaged children, adults, immigrants, and families through church-based initiatives.

Focus group participants identified mutual aid activities, such as caregiving for dependent children and adults, and assisting neighbors and friends, as examples of informal volunteering. They also identified a wide range of formalized opportunities for volunteering in the nonprofit and public sectors. These opportunities included one-to-one (mentoring, tutoring), one-to-many (teaching), and governance and policy roles (board positions, committees). In their initial attempts to define the term civic engagement, focus group participants did not usually include paid roles in the public or nonprofit sectors.

Focus group members offered individual summaries of civic engagement. Some of the brief and memorable statements included: *“Taking responsibility for the life of the community,”* *“Paying community rent,”* and *“The daily activities we do that make the world a better place.”* Ideas for CE slogans included: *“Engage at any age,”* *“Hope and challenge,”* and *“Encore.”*

Policy Implications

Challenges: Reimbursed roles as volunteers or employees in the public and nonprofit sectors emerged in the initial CE definition discussions in less than half of the focus groups. This omission could have implications because later focus group discussion revealed that baby boomers in particular wish to work in meaningful roles and receive some form of compensation as they approach and pass traditional retirement age. But the assets represented by baby boomers can only be utilized if enough people and institutions share, and act on, a comprehensive definition of CE that results in the creation of a wide range of roles in the public and nonprofit sectors before baby boomers reach retirement age.

Potential Solutions: A national campaign should be launched, similar to the Harvard School of Public Health’s “designated driver” initiative, to give CE a unique, positive image that includes older adults doing good work, unpaid and paid, to benefit their communities. Such a campaign should promote the physical and mental health benefits of community involvement by older adults and their value to the national community: “It’s good for you, it’s good for the community.” Employers should provide more avenues, such as flexible work schedules and paid leave, for CE and older workers’ transitions into active retirements. Employers that support civic engagement by older adults should be eligible for favorable tax treatment by government.

Aging in an Aging Society

The good news is that focus group participants may represent a sea change of opinion about aging in this country. Focus group participants dismissed the old views of what one is supposed to do at the age of 64, 74, and 84. They have been replaced with visions of *“the prime of life,”* *“freedom,”* *“involved,”* *“healthy,”* and *“lot of discovery left.”* Most focus group participants would likely challenge the young-old/old-old threshold of 75 and replace it with age 84 or 85 because they know so many role models who are thriving in their 7th, 8th, and 9th decades of life.

However, the bad news may be a disconnect that exists between the positive descriptors and the reality faced by baby boomers. Some focus group participants are experiencing age discrimination in the workplace, for instance. They said there are few *“gold watch”* ceremonies as corporations merge and older workers lose out in downsizing. Additionally, focus group participants said there is a dearth of meaningful, flexible, income earning opportunities that they seek as second careers or as transitions to full or part-time retirement. The baby boomer focus group participants remain optimistic about their choices because, unlike previous generations, they say they will not let their future course be decided for them. As one focus group member noted, *“Boomers have never been complacent or content to live with things as they are.”*

The 60-69 year-old focus group participants are riding the cusp of new beginnings. They are finishing careers, running businesses, and launching new blends of fun activities, such as spending time with grandchildren, learning, traveling, and maintaining their health. The focus group participants who have relocated to active adult communities are convinced they have found the chosen land for staying young, active, happy, and engaged. One focus group member quoted Satchel Paige, *“Don’t look*

back. Something might be gaining on you.” Most focus group participants would likely agree with that philosophy of aging and with a focus group member’s self-assessment, *“I am having the time of my life.”*

The 70+ focus group participants looked back on age 64 with fondness, noting that they were changing careers in some instances, developing new skills, and were free from children and must-do schedules. Now they’re charged up, enjoying life through learning and service, staying active, and maintaining positive attitudes as primary tools to combat aging. “They like *“being part of a major constituency”* and having *“a lot of political clout”* that *“wasn’t true fifty years ago.”* But as one focus group member said, *“Growing older is scary...there is no roadmap. This generation, especially among the minorities, is the first generation to retire with money and the ability to do some of the things we want to do.”* Health status is also a significant concern. *“As long as you’re healthy, it’s okay,”* said an octogenarian focus group member about her aging.

Policy Implications

Challenges: Older workers are often the most vulnerable during corporate mergers and suffer consequences that could affect their access to health care and financial stability in later life. Older adults have many skills that are lost to the economy when they exit the workforce.

Potential Solutions: Older workers need protection from age and disability discrimination, and the negative impacts of mergers. Employers and other organizations need to create career transition tools and pathways, including job sharing, and retraining if necessary, to keep willing and skilled older adults in the workforce as employees and volunteers.

Current Civic Engagement

Because the majority is still working, the baby boomer focus group participants talked about how their civic engagement is often linked to their employment. In fact, some focus group participants working in the nonprofit and public sectors said their voluntary civic engagement is sometimes difficult to separate from their jobs. Private sector focus group members tend to connect to civic and service organizations that allow them to network and build business relationships while contributing to community growth. Baby boomer and sixty-year old focus group members have served or are serving as caregivers to spouses, parents, and other family elders. They reported that the caregiving experience can be both a gift—in self-learning and strengthening relationships—and toll on the caregiver—in physical demands, life opportunity costs, and lost wages, savings, and future retirement benefits.

The focus group participants who are sixty and older are more likely to choose civic engagement opportunities that satisfy their desire to learn, to help certain population groups, and which may be extensions of their previous employment. They engage in all types of volunteer work from one-to-one to one-to-many to leadership roles. They particularly like to work with children in intergenerational settings but many are also happy working with their peers who need assistance. Additionally, they are more likely to be attracted to church-based activities, whether it is assisting their church to carry out its ministry, or to help church programs benefit disadvantaged populations.

The list of reasons for focus group participants to engage civically almost always starts with the role models created by parents and family members. Others cite a critical life event as a wake-up call to do work benefiting others in the community. Focus group participants also talked about their faith urging them to do

God's work, the numerous benefits—intrinsic, physical, mental, educational, social, and otherwise—to be gained from volunteering, and love for their fellow man and woman as CE motivations.

The obstacles to civic engagement, according to focus group members, are lack of time due to family and work constraints; lack of support from employers; cultural isolation; lack of connection to the opportunity; need for a break between work and retirement; and lack of role models.

Civic engagement activities figure prominently in the future plans of focus group participants. Almost everyone described busy futures. The baby boomer focus group participants want to earn income in meaningful quests, and still have time for traveling, spending time with family and friends, exercising for physical health, and contributing to the community. The sixty-year old focus group members are generally content and want to sustain their activities, live independently as long as possible, play with grandchildren, engage in physical activity, and remain open to CE opportunities. The age 70+ focus group members wish to continue their civic engagement but note that they might need to be more selective and local in their future scope of activity, since *“being able to drive is key.”* They want to *“keep active and think young.”*

Policy Implications

Challenges: Because of biased selection, focus group participants may be more involved in community work than many of their peers, indicating that a huge talent bank is going untapped. Top-of-mind informational connections to civic engagement opportunities for older adults do not always exist for newcomers to a community which leads to delays and failure to connect to CE opportunities. Outreach to diverse populations

of older adults may not exist either. Consequently, growing minority populations are not given the opportunity to vitalize their communities with their presence. Caregivers, often women, are struggling with the short- and long-term aspects of their responsibilities in relation to the rest of their lives.

Potential Solutions: Communities should develop a “needs and assets” inventory to match the skills and talents of residents with programs that need help to better serve the community. There should be a standard vehicle in each community such as 2-1-1 or the old Welcome Wagon model to enable older adults to learn about the CE options. To lessen confusion as Americans relocate to new areas, similar terminology should be used across the country to help incoming residents connect easily to community work opportunities. More employers need to provide support for caregiving and civic engagement activities. Government needs to support the critical role played by caregivers and offer remedies to offset wage loss, and reductions in future retirement benefits.

Enhancing Civic Engagement

All the focus groups identified transportation needs as the most significant barrier to overcome in order to engage a larger percentage of older adults in civic work. Discussants highly recommended accessible and inexpensive public transit as the answer. They also emphasized liability protection for volunteer drivers, better means for engaging homebound adults, and mileage or transportation cost reimbursement. Several focus groups also talked about improved community design to enable residents to be closer to civic opportunities. In particular, the Sun City West focus group believed that the close proximity of their community encourages civic involvement.

The 50-59 year-old focus group participants noted that different beliefs—cultural reliance on self and the baby boomers’ disinclination to see themselves as “older” much less approaching “senior” status—may hinder the baby boomers’ readiness to become involved in community work. The fifty-something focus group discussants stressed the development of new community touch-points for connecting to CE opportunities outside the traditional senior center network. They recommended employing a wide range of communications media including the Internet, and the need for employer support to expand baby boomers’ CE involvement. They also emphasized the “personal ask” to invite older adults to get involved in purposeful work, and to match the baby boomers’ interests and skills to the task. They would like the CE to be better integrated with their work requirements. They would also like to see volunteers enjoy improved schedule flexibility, health benefits, tax credits, legal protection for directors on boards, and experiments with “*bartering systems of credits*” or “*complementary currency systems*.”

The 60-69 year-old and 70 and older focus group participants also wish to spend their time and energy in meaningful pursuits. They largely agreed with the baby boomers’ list of incentives, and added free food, stipends for fixed income volunteers, and coverage of the costs of screening measures for volunteers, such as background checks and drug tests. Both the 60-69 year-old and 70 and older focus group participants talked about improving the recruiting and retention of volunteers with personal and quick follow-up;

interest-to-task matching; adequate compensation to recruit and retain skilled volunteer management staff; and training for volunteers.

Policy Implications

Challenges: Older adults can drive themselves only as long as they are fit and economically able. Because the baby boom focus group participants and some of the sixty year old focus group members dislike the term “senior” applied to themselves, senior centers may not be attractive CE information exchange points in the future. Different motivations drive older adults to get involved in civic work so many personalized recruiting approaches and incentives are needed. Older adults may need different types of economic assistance to sustain themselves as volunteers.

Potential Solutions: Local, state, and federal governments need to build alternate forms of transportation, as well as help offset costs associated with transportation of volunteers. A wide range of communication tools and customized approaches should be devised to recruit older adults. Senior centers need to consider other names and the addition of new functions—social, physical, and intergenerational—that bring in active older adults. Public and nonprofit organizations need to offer innovative incentive packages for talented older adults to enrich mission delivery with their skills and talents. More favorable tax treatment is needed to encourage older adults to share their mental assets with the community.

GSA’s forum and focus group independent aging agenda events were designed to provide input to the Policy Committee of the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. These events were neither sponsored nor endorsed by the White House, nor do they in any way represent the policies, positions, or opinions of the 2005 White House Conference on Aging or the federal government. The proposed solutions do not represent official policies or positions of The Gerontological Society of America.