

KEEPING BABY BOOMERS VOLUNTEERING

A Research Brief on Volunteer Retention and Turnover

Executive Summary

Corporation for
**NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE** 

BACKGROUND

Baby Boomers—the generation of 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964—represent a potential boost to the volunteer world, not only because of the sheer size of the generation but also because of its members' high levels of education, wealth, and skills. Based on U.S. Census data, the number of volunteers age 65 and older will increase 50 percent over the next 13 years, from fewer than 9 million in 2007 to more than 13 million in 2020. What's more, that number will continue to rise for many years to come, as the youngest Baby Boomers will not reach age 65 until 2029. Harnessing Baby Boomers' skills and accommodating their expectations will be critical to solving a wide range of social problems in the years ahead.

To attract Baby Boomers to volunteering, experts on aging agree that nonprofit groups and others must boldly rethink the types of opportunities they offer—to “re-imagine” roles for older American volunteers that cater to Boomers' skills and desire to make their mark in their own way. This is vitally important to ensuring that the potential of this vast resource is tapped to its fullest.

While much attention has focused on how to recruit Baby Boomers as volunteers, relatively little attention has been paid to ensuring that those who volunteer one year continue to do so the next. The importance of volunteer retention should not be underestimated. Despite their reputation for self-centeredness, Baby Boomers today have the highest volunteer rate of any age group. They also, as this report notes, volunteer at higher rates than past generations did when they were the same age. Because 3 out of every 10 Baby Boomer volunteers choose not to volunteer in the following year, and since Baby Boomers are the next generation of older adults, it is important to understand how best to capture their experience and energy and what factors will impact their decision to volunteer from year to year.

To examine this further, the Corporation for National and Community Service has analyzed data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census as part of its regular decennial Census, as well as data collected in 1974, 1989, and from 2002 to 2006 as part of a special Volunteer Supplement to the Current

Population Survey. The data trace the volunteer habits of the same sample of Baby Boomers over two consecutive years, as well as a similar sample of pre-Boomers. Here are some findings about Baby Boomers gleaned from that research:

KEY FINDINGS

■ Baby Boomers volunteer today at higher rates than past generations did at roughly the same age.

At 30.9 percent, the volunteer rate for those ages 46 to 57 today, who make up the majority of the Baby Boomers, is significantly higher than both the 25.3 percent recorded by the same age cohort in 1974 (Greatest Generation, born 1910-1930) and the 23.2 percent recorded in 1989 (Silent Generation, born 1931-1945). Baby Boomers were volunteering at lower rates than their predecessors while in their 30s, but that trend has reversed.

■ Remaining in the workforce increases the likelihood that a Baby Boomer will continue to volunteer.

69.3 percent of Baby Boomer volunteers who experience no change in their labor status continue to volunteer the following year, compared to 60.5 percent of those who move out of the workforce.

■ Baby Boomers' relatively high volunteer rate is tied to their education level and propensity to have children later in life.

Education levels and whether one has children are two key predictors of volunteer levels; the factors account in part for the fact that the volunteer rate for Baby Boomer is peaking later in life than past generations. In fact, mid-life adults (ages 45 to 64) are nearly three times as likely to have a four-year college degree today as they were 15 years ago (from 11.5% to 29.5%). Once their children leave, Baby Boomers could maintain relatively high volunteer rates because of their higher education levels and expectations that they will work later in life than previous generations, two factors connected to higher volunteer rates.

■ Baby Boomers appear to have different volunteer interests than past generations.

In the past 15 years, there has been a change in the types of organizations with which people ages 41 to 59 volunteer. While volunteering through religious

organizations is still the most popular venue for volunteer participation, volunteering with educational organizations has grown and is now the second most common venue for adult volunteers in this age range (Boomers). In 1989, when the Silent and Greatest Generations were between ages 41 to 59, the second most popular type of volunteer organization was civic, political, business, and international.

■ Baby Boomers who engage in professional or management volunteer activities are the most likely to volunteer from year to year.

The year-to-year retention rate for Baby Boomer volunteers who perform more challenging assignments, such as professional or management activities (like strategic planning, volunteer management and coordination, and marketing) is the highest, at 74.8 percent, followed by Baby Boomers who engage in music or other performance arts (70.9%) and those who do tutoring, mentoring, and coaching (70.3%).

■ The more hours a Baby Boomer devotes to volunteering, the more likely he or she will volunteer from year to year.

As annual volunteer hours among Baby Boomers increase, so do volunteer retention rates, making volunteering a “virtuous cycle.” Nearly 8 of 10 Baby Boomer volunteers who serve 100 to 499 hours a year volunteer again the following year, compared to just over 5 in 10 who serve 1 to 14 hours. In between, nearly 74 percent of those who give 50 to 99 hours continue to volunteer the following year. Likewise, 79 percent of volunteers continue volunteering when they serve 12 or more weeks a year.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

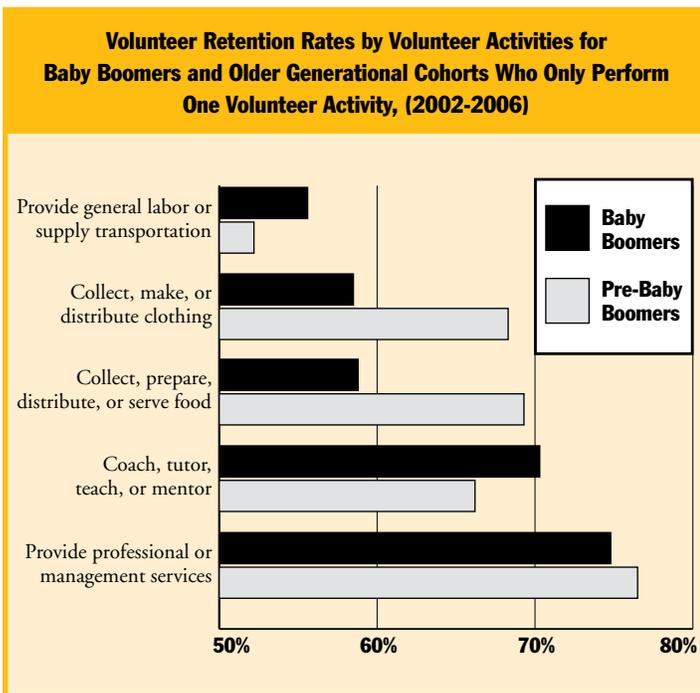
The hope is that the findings contained herein will help nonprofits and others gain greater insight into the volunteer preferences of Baby Boomers. If the nonprofit community can rethink how to utilize Baby Boomers as volunteers, turnover will be kept to a minimum and the greatest number of Boomers will remain engaged in their communities.

■ Nonprofits should look to put Baby Boomers’ skills to use in order to retain them as volunteers, as Baby Boomers are seeking challenging opportunities.

■ Nonprofits also need to strengthen their view of volunteers as assets, similar to how they view their donors and how employers view their employees. The more positive experiences a volunteer has, the more likely he or she is to return, just as with an employee or donor.

■ Adoption of key practices, such as matching volunteers with appropriate and challenging assignments, providing professional development opportunities for volunteers, and treating volunteers as valued partners, can help build organizational capacity to increase volunteer participation, and also sustain it.

■ Since volunteering and giving are related, and trillions of dollars are expected to be given to charity in the coming decades, it makes sense for nonprofits to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it could eventually produce considerable monetary gifts.



■ Baby Boomers who engage in general labor or supply transportation are the least likely to volunteer the following year.

The year-to-year retention rate for Baby Boomer volunteers who do general labor and supply transportation is the lowest, at 55.6 percent.

CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE AUTHORS

John Foster-Bey, Senior Advisor, Office of Research and Policy Development

Robert Grimm, Jr., Director, Office of Research and Policy Development and Senior Counsel to the CEO

Nathan Dietz, Research Associate and Statistician, Office of Research and Policy Development

THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The Office of Research and Policy Development (RPD) is part of the CEO's Office within the Corporation for National and Community Service. RPD's mission is to develop and cultivate knowledge that will enhance the mission of the Corporation and of volunteer and community service programs.

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RELATED RESEARCH REPORTS ON VOLUNTEERING

Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974. December 2006. Provides an in-depth look at volunteering over the past 30 years, with particular attention paid to changing historical volunteer patterns by select age groups. The report analyzes data on volunteering collected by the Census Bureau in 1974 and 1989.

College Students Helping America. October 2006. Identifies key trends in volunteering among college students ages 16 to 24, looks at the demographics and select civic behaviors of college students who volunteer, discusses future implications for volunteering given the changing college environment, and provides state rankings for volunteering among college students.

Volunteering in America: State Trends and Rankings. June 2006. Presents a national, regional, and state-by-state analysis of volunteering trends.

Volunteers Mentoring Youth: Implications for Closing the Mentoring Gap. May 2006. Provides a greater understanding of the characteristics and traits that distinguish individuals whose volunteering includes mentoring youth from volunteers who do not mentor.

Youth Helping America Series. Educating for Active Citizens: Service-Learning, School-Based Service, and Youth Civic Engagement. March 2006. Takes a closer look at participation in school-based service among middle school and high school aged youth, paying particular attention to the relationship between different service-learning experiences and civic attitudes and outcomes.

Youth Helping America Series. Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering. November 2005. Explores the state of youth volunteering and the connections between youth volunteering and the primary social institutions to which teenagers are exposed – family, schools, and religious congregations.

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CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

1201 New York Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20525 • 202-606-5000 • TTY: (202) 606-3472

www.nationalservice.gov • e-mail: info@cns.gov

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