



**EXPERIENCE AFTER SCHOOL: MATCHING  
OLDER ADULTS' ASSETS AND INTERESTS  
WITH OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME NEEDS**

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January 2007

Prepared for Experience Corps, with support  
from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

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## Executive Summary

As after-school programs expand in number and extend their services, they face challenges in staffing. At the same time, a growing cohort of older adults expresses enthusiasm for serving the community and working with children and youth. What are the prospects for making a good match, and what can be done to improve the prospects?

This report, commissioned by Experience Corps as part of its exploration of possibilities for older adults in the out-of-school-time field, summarizes relevant evidence from three sources: national data on program and staffing trends in the after-school field; interviews with leaders of high-quality after-school programs; and focus groups with older adults.

Although the out-of-school time field is growing in size and is taking on a more ambitious mission in blending academic programming with youth development, few program leaders have thought about looking to nontraditional sources of staff like older adults. Our data suggest, indeed, that a lack of information on both sides is a major impediment to engaging older adults in after-school programs, whether in direct-service or administrative roles. Program leaders have not thought about the capabilities that older adults could bring. Older adults are unfamiliar with the growth in the after-school movement and with the purposeful, well-organized environment now found in many programs.

A well-managed program can secure older adults' long-term commitment by dedicating some staff time to the management of volunteers and part-time paid staff, by offering flexibility in scheduling, and by providing training that is well tailored to the skills and interests that the older adults bring. To recruit and retain older adults—and, indeed, to attract and use staff of all kinds more effectively—after-school programs should consider the following recommendations drawn from this study's data:

- ***Strengthen the infrastructure.*** After-school programs need a developed infrastructure that includes paid staff to oversee recruitment, placement, coordination, training, and supervision.
- ***Challenge stereotypes.*** Contrary to stereotypes, adults over 55 have diverse talents and interests and are willing to make different levels and kinds of commitments. After-school programs, contrary to stereotypes, increasingly offer rich and well-structured programming to foster development and learning. If program leaders knew more about older adults and older adults knew more about programs, they could more readily see the potential fit.
- ***Recruit for talent, not for age.*** Today's after-school programs need the talents older adults have accumulated. Skillful marketing

about the opportunities in after-school programming can stimulate interest from older adults.

- ***Enlist experienced individuals in administrative or managerial roles.*** Not every contributor to an after-school program works directly with children and youth. Older adults with skills in fund raising, communications, research, neighborhood relations, staff development, and many other arenas could make valuable contributions as part-time paid workers or volunteers.
- ***Reward service.*** While not every volunteer seeks a stipend or reimbursement, many older adults who have valuable experience to share with children can use modest assistance, stipends, or reimbursement for their services. Nearly all value the intangible rewards that come from public thank-yous and recognition.
- ***Use existing model practices.*** Teaming up with supportive national or local organizations can enable after-school programs to learn best practices for recruiting and managing a workforce that is diverse in age. Thus, despite their modest budgets, after-school programs may be better able to benefit from the developed talents of older adults

## Acknowledgments

This study reports the insights of many people. One very thoughtful group of participants included leaders of high-quality after-school programs and the intermediary organizations that support them. We were fortunate to talk with program leaders who are nationally known in the after-school arena. The following leaders were particularly generous with their time and ideas: in Boston, Mary Gunn, Generations, Inc.; in Lincoln, LeaAnn Johnson and Cathie Petsch, Lincoln Community Learning Centers; in San Francisco, Michael Funk and Janet Oh, Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center and Bay Area Experience Corps; and in Washington, DC, Mark Ouellette of the Children and Youth Investment Trust.

More than 100 older adults graciously offered their time and thoughts as members of our focus groups. These individuals, who actively contribute their talents to a variety of civic services, enriched our thinking about how to create more opportunities to connect after-school programs to a wider base of support.

We would also like to thank the many individuals in each city who helped recruit focus group participants and hosted our meetings. They included Naomi Weiner, Massachusetts Service Alliance; Barbara Bartle, Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools; Hongmai Nguyen, San Francisco Department of Aging and Adult Services; and Lois Berkowitz, Washington, DC, Experience Corps.

The study's advisory group identified productive directions for our work and helped put the preliminary findings in policy perspective. Its members were: Kimberly A. Adler, AARP; Felicia Brown, AARP; Michael Funk, Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center and Bay Area Experience Corps; Darin McKeever, Heads Up; Shirley Sagawa, Sagawa/Jospin; Andrea S. Taylor, Temple University/Center for Intergenerational Learning.

Michelle Hynes, Director of Programs at Experience Corps and Vice President of Civic Ventures, thoughtfully guided the study from beginning to end. John Gomperts, CEO of Experience Corps and President of Civic Ventures, also contributed valuable advice at key junctures. Finally, we are grateful to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for its support.

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## Background

Experience Corps, a signature program of Civic Ventures, facilitates the engagement of older adults in solving social problems. While much of its current work focuses on literacy programs in schools during regular class hours, in several cities older adults are also working with youth after school in roles such as mentoring, tutoring, and leading enrichment activities.

This report addresses the possibilities of meeting some of the staffing needs in the growing and changing field of out-of-school time by engaging more older adults. Since the mid-1990s, the number of after-school programs has grown so quickly that it is outstripping the available human resources needed to staff and sustain the programs (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2006). To help meet the human-resource needs while extending the benefits of active engagement to a wider population of older adults, Experience Corps is exploring the possibility of expanding its work with after-school programs.

After-school programming has become a public policy priority. In a poll conducted just after the 2006 mid-term election, the Afterschool Alliance (2006) found that two in three voters (65 percent) considered after-school programs as “an absolute necessity” for their community. More than 80 percent of the poll’s respondents, regardless of party affiliation, agreed on the need for an organized and safe place for children and youth after school.

A variety of funding sources support after-school programs, as foundations and local communities have followed the lead of federal programs in the Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) by encouraging local coalitions to extend their community-based services outside of school to all children. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, an initiative of ED, began a little more than 10 years ago as a \$1 million demonstration program. By 2006, the program distributed funding to every state and had grown to nearly a \$1 billion component of No Child Left Behind. And, in 2006, a combination of federal and state contributions to the HHS Child Care and Development Fund is estimated to approach \$7 billion (National Institute on Out-of-School Time [NIOST], 2006, pp. 5-6).

As after-school programs expand, they need more staff. On the sheer numbers needed, advocates in the field point to surging demand for after-school services. The Afterschool Alliance concluded from its national household survey conducted in 2003 that the 6.5 million K-12 children then participating in after-school programs would be joined by an additional 15 million participants if programs were available in their communities (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) also states that the demand for before- and after-school services is rising and is creating growth in employment opportunities, although it does not project specific numbers of new workers needed.

New types of skills are needed as well. The investment in children in the non-school hours has expanded services well beyond the traditional program repertoire, which centered on recreation, arts, and custodial care. Increasingly, programs now include comprehensive recreational, arts, and community experiences as well as academic learning opportunities such as focused tutoring and mentoring of students at risk of school failure (Miller, 2003).

Experience Corps has shown the success of its recruitment and placement efforts in school-day programs (Raley, 2006). Now the expanding after-school movement opens more and more opportunities for older adults who are interested in supporting children and youth in their out-of-school hours.

Older adults potentially represent a deep pool of talent. The population of adults 55 and older is projected to nearly double in size by 2030 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007). Nearly half of adults ages 50 to 70 report an interest in taking jobs or volunteering to help improve the quality of life in their communities (MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures, 2005, p. 6).

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The benefits for older adults of paid or unpaid service have been demonstrated. For example, participation in Experience Corps led to short-term improvements in the physical activity of previously inactive adults (Tan, Xue, Li, Carlson, & Fried, 2006). A different study compared the long-term effects of volunteering on the reported life satisfaction and health of adults aged 60 and older, compared with adults between 25 and 50. The older volunteers reported greater increases in life satisfaction and experienced greater positive changes in their health, by comparison with the younger adult volunteers (Van Willigen, 2000).

In this study, Experience Corps sought to learn more about ways in which it could help make a productive match between the after-school field and the older adult workforce. In consultation with an expert advisory panel, Experience Corps planned an exploratory study, and Policy Studies Associates (PSA) was selected to conduct the study. This is the final report of that study.

## **Study Design**

PSA researchers conducted interviews and focus groups in four different communities around the country, investigating what has been done and what could be done to recruit and engage active older adults in varied roles in after-school programs. The study was designed to generate information for decision makers in the after-school field about the potential resource that older adults represent. The key question explored was how communities could strengthen their after-school programs by engaging the talents and interests of older adults. The study team also identified ways in which support organizations like

Experience Corps could facilitate effective matchmaking and help sustain working relationships between the programs and older adults.

The study addressed research questions about older adults' current engagement in the field and about the potential for broadening their participation. The questions were the following:

- What issues of workforce capacity are facing after-school programs in different types of communities?
- What opportunities and barriers have after-school program leaders experienced (or assumed they will experience) in engaging older adults as staff or volunteers?
- In what ways could increased participation by older adults help after-school programs meet their goals for program improvement or expansion?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do specific demographic groups of older adults have an interest in after-school service and work?
- What types of incentives could effectively promote sustained engagement by older Americans?
- What participation arrangements could effectively attract older Americans into sustained service after school?

Working with local organizations affiliated with Experience Corps and other community-based sponsors of high-quality after-school services, the research team conducted interviews and focus groups with older adults and after-school leaders in Boston, San Francisco, Lincoln, and Washington, DC. Across these cities, data were gathered from:

- Interviews with more than 30 leaders of exemplary after-school programs and of umbrella organizations for these programs
- Focus groups with more than 100 older adults varying in age, work history, and racial and cultural background (see Appendix)
  - About 40 percent of the participants now work with children as tutors, mentors, or teachers
  - More than 60 percent are active in other civic arenas or with organizations for older adults

The participants in this study were not statistically representative of the after-school field or of older adults. Thus, conclusions that we draw from their

comments do not address the numbers of programs that work in particular ways or the numbers of older adults, nationally or in these communities, who bring particular skills or interests to their civic engagement. However, by talking in depth with groups of participants we identified attitudes, assumptions, and ideas that suggest potentially fruitful directions for after-school programs to pursue in drawing on the talents of older adults.

This report begins with a brief review of current programmatic and staffing trends in the after-school field. It describes how exemplary programs are expanding and enhancing their services, addresses the staffing needs associated with these trends, and identifies challenges that programs face in staffing up. Turning to the possibility of using older adults to meet some of these staffing challenges, it describes attitudes that program leaders bring to the idea of engaging older adults, and organizational supports that help or hinder the engagement of older adults. From the perspective of the older adults who participated in focus groups, it then reports on the positive and negative aspects of working in after-school programs, and the incentives and arrangements that would effectively bring these older adults and others like them into sustained involvement in these programs.

## **Trends in After-School Programming and Staffing**

To assess the prospects for engaging more older adults in after-school programs, it is important first to consider how the field is changing, the staffing needs that are emerging, and current staffing practices. This section of the report thus identifies opportunities and challenges in the field for which older adults might be an important resource.

### **Researchers and Practitioners Endorse Ambitious Program Designs**

The benefit of having children safely and productively occupied after school has been long recognized, but programming has been changed by the national commitment to academic excellence for all. Increasingly, high-quality after-school programs strive to combine academic learning with positive youth development. The ideal program design for today's after-school programs, experts agree, would contribute to participants' development in academic, social, emotional, health, and civic arenas. The breadth of purposes found in high-quality programs today is illustrated by a widely distributed volume that reflects current thinking in the field (C. S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-school Research and Practice, 2005). It cites the following goals for programs:

- Academic and other learning, including improved skills in literacy, communication, math, social studies, and science; increased

knowledge, participation, and skills in visual and performing arts; and increased awareness of real-life applications of academic skills

- Social and emotional growth, including improved social skills, increased leadership and responsibility, and reductions in risky behavior
- Health and safety, involving improved nutrition and health practices, physical development, and personal safety
- Community awareness and engagement

Describing the characteristics of today's strongest programs, a symposium of after-school practitioners and evaluators spoke of the field's progress toward "high-quality, accessible, sustainable, accountable, and data-driven services for children and youth" (Harvard Family Research Project [HFRP], 2005, p. 4). High-quality after-school programs offer positive role models and mentors and a mix of academic and non-academic learning. Furthermore, researchers reported that the most engaging programs nurture and expand youth interests, foster independent decision making, and engage youth and families in their communities (HFRP, 2005; Proscio & Whiting, 2004).

Among the types of activities found in notably successful after-school programs are the following (Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, & Mielke, 2005):

- A broad array of enriched learning opportunities
- Opportunities for skill building and mastery
- Intentional relationship building through classroom-management training for staff, conflict resolution and team building for children and youth, and regular communication with families

The program leaders interviewed for this study spoke of their efforts to meet similarly broad expectations for their programs. For example, one leader said:

We're very focused on strengthening youth outcomes—[so that youth will develop a] good sense of themselves, independence, learning planning skills... and we're doing the kind of program planning that develops those youth skills and competencies... We are giving young people a voice in their own programming, encouraging their leadership skills and motivating their attachment to school.

The after-school programs whose leaders we interviewed have a focus on academics and skill building as a complement to a youth-development orientation.

They seek to broaden youth access to the arts and technology, and to both remedial and advanced literacy, mathematics, and science content. A program leader interviewed for this study also said that after-school programs are accepting responsibility for teaching participants “about real life,” including skills in job preparation, obtaining student loans, and maintaining bank accounts, “so they walk out of here with practical skills.”

*“We have to educate the public about what we are doing.”*

Program leaders know that this picture of programs outside the school day is not understood by the public, whose perception of after-school programming focuses more on recreation and custodial care: “We have to educate the public about what we are doing,” one commented. “It’s not like in the old days.... Now we do much more literacy development, academic projects.”

### **Staffing Needs Follow from Program Design**

An increasingly complex programmatic agenda calls for staff members and volunteers who can shape and deliver curriculum in academic content, the arts, music, and physical activities, as well as fostering warm, supportive relationships with youth (PSA, 2000). It also requires sophisticated administrative skills. Later in this report, we discuss the possibilities of meeting some of these needs by enlisting older adults.

In the interviews conducted for this study, after-school program leaders identified skills and talents that they need in their front-line staff in order to provide wide-ranging programming to today’s participants. They spoke of:

- An “assets orientation” that focuses on strengths, not deficits
- Teaching at high achievement levels (e.g., advanced academic subjects)
- Experience with the arts, including visual arts, theater, music, and crafts
- Knowledge of multiple languages and traditions
- Skills as counselors and mentors
- Capacity to listen to and learn from youth
- Life skills to impart, e.g., writing a resume, managing money
- “Street credentials” as members of the community in which the children and youth live

In programs for elementary students, skilled literacy and mathematics tutors and remedial experts are in short supply. As programs expand into higher grades, they need youth counselors with street knowledge, but they also need staff expertise in helping youth pass advanced courses and exit exams, and in coaching young people through applications for jobs and postsecondary education.

In addition to needing staff who can effectively teach and work with youth, programs also need help at the administrative and managerial levels. The leaders whom we interviewed pointed to the need for help in the following areas of work:

- Grant writing and fund raising
- Data collection and use
- Communications (press contacts, writing publications and brochures)
- Parent and community liaison
- Translation services for multilingual populations
- Mentors for staff and new leaders

As funders increasingly insist on data-driven programs, the professional capacity to use data is in demand. A program leader commented:

From an organizational perspective, things are changing. Skill sets are more linked to research and evaluation as grants get more outcomes based. We have to tell the story and show the data that foundations and [other sponsors] want to see.

In summary, after-school programs need an increasingly wide range of staff skills. As their programmatic goals expand and deepen, they need more kinds of help both in front-line positions working with children and youth, and in administrative positions that support programs in the financial, communications, evaluation, and community relations domains. These findings point to possibilities for engaging older adults. But to recruit staff and volunteers strategically, much of the after-school field would need to undergo a change in mindset about staffing.

### **Shoestring Budgets Prevent Programs from Strategically Expanding Their Staff**

Despite the efforts of after-school programs to fulfill a more ambitious agenda with children and youth, one that calls for diverse staff skills, the staffing picture in the after-school field reflects its prevailing low salaries and limited benefits. The funds available to most after-school programs support one manager, who may or may not be a college-educated professional; a clerical staff member; and a youthful paraprofessional staff, often working part time while in school. Finding well-qualified and talented people who “can come to us at our salary levels,” as one of our interviewees put it, is after-school leaders’ most persistent challenge. Those interviewed for this study repeatedly cited limited budgets as an obstacle in staffing.

Their observations echo research findings in the Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (Intercultural Center for Research in Education and NIOST, 2005). Although that study (as well as Halpern, 2004) demonstrated that improved outcomes and program stability were associated with the educational levels of directors and service providers, it revealed barriers to hiring a well-educated staff. The program coordinators surveyed for that study said that their modest budgets prevented them from securing a stable, educated staff. Similarly, in this study, some after-school leaders told us that they hire inexperienced young people because it is “much easier and cheaper” to hire a person who has limited credentials.

*Some after-school leaders hire young people because it is “much easier and cheaper” to hire a person with limited credentials.*

More broadly, the out-of-school-time workforce is burdened by its lack of “a clear professional identity” (LeMenstrel & Dennehy, 2003). Its job functions and titles vary, including child care worker, instructor/teacher, youth worker/leader, and recreation specialist. Yet none of these varied titles suggests that employees demonstrate progressively higher skill levels, and as a result the field has difficulty attracting mature, skilled youth specialists or teachers as regular staff. Staffing in after-school programs also typically relies on part-time positions with few or no benefits. Summing it up in an interview for this study, one leader enumerated the staffing challenges that she faces:

How well people are treated, how they are paid and compensated beyond pay, the benefits and opportunities for career advancement. The work is not yet viewed as professional by the public...[so] there isn't an opportunity for advancement and there is no clear credentialing program for obtaining a higher salary.

Similarly, another leader said:

We're still thought of babysitters really, and people don't realize we want people to have lots of different skills in teaching to different learning needs, paying attention to different learning styles.

As after-school institutions mature, their leaders may see a need to supplement their underpaid, often temporary, line staff. One leader spoke of wanting to offer a job “with a meaningful role,” saying, “You need trained people to work with young people... to develop leadership skills,” and these staff must be skillful teachers as well. That combination of talent is not readily available among young people who are willing to work at hourly rates of \$10 an hour or less.

However, budget constraints even limit the program leaders' ability to step back and consider alternate staffing arrangements. One commented that “current after-school executives are already overworked” and are “so busy keeping the

doors open and the lights on that they don't have the time to think strategically" about staffing.

## **Older Adults as a Resource to Programs**

Thus, we see that the after-school field has high aspirations for its programming, which call for a wide array of staff skills and experience, but that the field has not been able to address its workforce needs as systematically as some would wish.

Against this backdrop, our study delved into the advantages and disadvantages, from a programmatic perspective, of involving older adults more extensively in after-school programs. A few of the leaders we interviewed have experience in working with older adults as volunteers or paid staff. Most of the other after-school leaders had given little or no thought to engaging older adults, and many of them had initial concerns about the prospect. However, by brainstorming about the possibilities they identified some ways in which they might arrange to take good advantage of the assets brought by older adults.

### **Program Managers May Need Support for Involving Older Adults**

As our interviews began, most of the after-school program leaders observed that older adults are not now working in their programs. One said:

Older adults—I *never* see any in our programs. You see them in early childhood programs, but we don't see them in programs with older youth.

Under Experience Corps leadership, a few after-school organizations have begun to successfully recruit and train older adults to offer supplementary tutoring services on a volunteer or stipended basis (Experience Corps, 2004). However, few of the program leaders in this study knew of the Experience Corps initiative. In our interviews, most were being asked for the first time whether older adults might be a resource to their programs.

Some participants expressed the concern that older adults might lack flexibility and might bring rigid assumptions about how children should behave. Many leaders were apprehensive about older adults having a "more authoritarian child-rearing style" that could interfere with an assets orientation to children. But another program leader, who is himself 63 years old, struck a more optimistic note:

I think perhaps people can be encouraged to educate themselves about what exists now with young people...not from when you were young, or

when you were growing up, and how people thought then and what you will and will not tolerate. No... you've got to be flexible and open.

Some wondered whether young program managers would be comfortable with an older adult. One youthful leader frankly acknowledged:

Program managers might be uncomfortable managing older adults—someone the age of your father—it might feel awkward. So there's a need to build capacity within staff on encouraging their openness to older adults.

Reflecting a similar concern about interacting with more seasoned individuals, another leader asked,

How can organizations also learn from these elders who have a lot of experience and are fresh eyes into the organization? A lot of us are under capacity and we're not able to absorb good feedback. How do we create systems so ... elders can come in and give us suggestions constructively... and we can feel comfortable with listening?

*Organizations need to be prepared to bring people in with new kinds of talents and roles—especially if they come with little familiarity with the after-school world.*

As program managers reflected on the prospect of integrating older adults into their programs, they anticipated challenges. They pointed out that their organizations need to be prepared to bring people in with new kinds of talents and roles—especially if they come with different experiences and little familiarity with today's children and adolescents or with the after-school world. "Everyone needs to be on board about each person's contributions," a leader cautioned.

### **Program Leaders Were Able To See Older Adults as a Potential Resource**

Despite these concerns, some of the after-school leaders saw potential advantages in involving older adults, even if they had not previously considered the possibility. For example, one said:

I think we can really look to older adults—there's a lot of experience there that we haven't tapped. It's just not a conversation that has occurred in the field... That's something really exciting to think about—how to engage older adults from the communities in which they would serve.... There's definitely the need. The more I talk, the more ways I can see the potential of this resource.

Similarly, another participant said:

This is a very vibrant time in this field. The idea of engaging older adults provides an opportunity that few have thought of. I think it's a matter of getting the word out and ensuring that program execs can see the opportunity and grab it.

In brainstorming about roles for older adults, different ideas emerged. Some program leaders said that older adults could provide direct service as in-class assistants, "greeters," translators, mentors, or activity leaders for particular activities. As greeters, the older adults could welcome children to the program each day and reach out to parents as they pick their children up at the end of the programming day.

One program leader who happens to be an older adult observed that people are too easily "pigeonholed or put in boxes or categories." This leader went on to say:

Anyone who can contribute [to my program] is welcome. If there is a grandmother who cannot dance but is interested in fabrics, that's okay. You can do that.... Or they say, "I can cook"; then they do that... Or we have an older male who says, "I know woodworking, so I can help them with that."... Don't waste resources by being pristine about their definition. You use people's skills where they're needed and where they can be used... and we use this as a family strengthening tool.

***Workers with the "know how to work the social service systems" would be invaluable.***

Thinking beyond direct-service roles, some program leaders reflected on the need to connect students to the social service systems as they serve more young people with ever greater personal and social ends. Retired social workers or social service workers who would come to the program with the "know how to work the social service systems" would be invaluable, one said.

Older adults could also help with administrative, training, or support functions. Currently, program leaders find themselves shouldering much of that work, and they would welcome a chance to share it:

Believe me when I tell you it's just us [playing all these varied roles]. Administrative assistants, data managers, or grant writers would be a definite assistance.

Reflecting the field's concerns about budget constraints, several program leaders spoke of the financial advantages that might come from hiring older adults on a part-time or volunteer basis. Attracting older adults into their programs at a relatively low cost might ease the financial stress on expanding programs. In this vein, program leaders spoke of a low-cost workforce of older adults as a means to help meet the goal of providing service for every child who wants it by 2010

(Afterschool Alliance, 2005). One commented that such widespread service will be unlikely

...without the money and without understanding that after-school programs are not just about playing around. People have to understand that we're a place where every child can benefit from fun and enrichment services, to targeted homework and academic help. If [older adults] could help make these services free—just imagine!

For others, though, the financial incentive to involve older adults would have to be direct and immediate, in the form of a targeted grant:

If some grant came across and said, "We want you to support having older adults come in," we'd go for it for sure, but nothing has encouraged us in this direction up to now.

### **Program Leaders Suggested Structures for Managing Older Adults' Involvement**

Whether or not they had direct experience with older adults in their programs, the leaders most strongly emphasized the need for good coordinating structures for managing any group of volunteer or part-time workers, such as older adults. "It is not as simple as saying, 'y'all come!'" a seasoned program leader commented, focusing particularly on the management of volunteer help:

We have a lot of experience with people coming in with big ideas.... I learned from experience that we had to fit people where we could provide support. ... The idea of a self-managing volunteer system is a myth.... Volunteer coordination needs to be in place for volunteers to be effective and they need adequate support [and space to work] for everyone to have a good experience. Even within the structures we have, I had to cap the numbers of volunteers ... because we didn't have the capacity to support them .... It's hard because we really had to turn volunteers away....

*What is needed is a "structured system with numerous options for slotting people into roles."*

What is needed, explained a manager of an Experience Corps program, is a

...structured system with numerous options for slotting people into roles, recruitment strategies, and someone to organize and sustain relationships among volunteers and outreach. Period. We need people who can apply system building strategies and who are willing to look to older adults.

After-school leaders also said they would benefit from help in recruiting older adults for paid or volunteer roles. Some said that they would not know

where to begin recruiting, and one who knew about Experience Corps called it a unique resource:

Other than [Experience Corps], we don't have support for recruiting older adults that I know of around here. Where would you even find older adults to work with us? I just don't know where to look! ... There isn't an automatic place to find them or to think about fitting them in... I mean, I can see it would be a good thing, but it's just not something most of us have thought about.

Another sketched a way of approaching the recruiting challenge, emphasizing that it would require strategic thinking and partnerships:

It's about finding the venues where older adults congregate—venues where there will networking... and by having CBOs and those entities partner. It's about being intentional about those activities and plans.

Reflecting on the possible difficulties of recruiting, a program director commented:

Do seniors realize that they have talents that we can really, really use? Are we communicating how much we need those skills?... There are older folks who are an untapped mine ... there are acres of diamonds right in our own neighborhoods.... Why aren't we mining them?

We turn next to the data that this study gathered from the “untapped mine...of diamonds,” the older adults whose energies might potentially contribute to the after-school field.

## **Older Adults' Perspectives**

More than 100 older adults participated in this study's focus groups. Some were already working in after-school programs, but most were not, although all were active in some aspect of civic life. We discuss the rewards that some experience in working in after-school programs, and what causes others to hesitate. We then report on potentially effective approaches for recruitment and retention. We conclude with some particular issues that may arise in drawing skilled professionals into the after-school field.

### **Those Working in the After-School Field Cite Emotional Rewards**

Some of the older adults who participated in our focus groups currently work in the after-school field, and others work with children in a school setting. For many of these individuals, the personal rewards are paramount. Tutors in

after-school programs said that they value students' motivation to work hard and the atmosphere that allows them to work informally with children. Mentors spoke of being moved by the needs of the students and the personal connection they forge with them.

Most of the participants indicated that their commitment to service and to their community was a longstanding value, often dating back to their own childhood. For this group, it was logical in their later years to find ways to “give back.” But contributors also described other important personal benefits such as the value of staying active, the joy of being with children, and the satisfaction they gained from helping a young person. One participant in his late 60s summed up a whole range of personal rewards:

I was an IRS auditor and never married, never had children, and ... I wanted to be of service, do something useful, and get some exercise, because that's the big challenge of retirement, to find something to do to exercise your mind and body.

Another spoke of having “discovered this ability to work with kids and I had no idea that I wanted to do this kind of work.” In general, one said:

It's a win/win situation. Older adults like to be with children, and children listen to them and like sharing their talents with them.... I love doing outreach, showing kids what I know ... because it's really helping them.

Many also respond well to the freedom in after-school settings, compared with the more structured school day, to develop their own routines and to use their different talents and life skills in the program. Volunteers teaching in the arts, for example, reported that in an after-school setting they were “freer to do what I want to do with the kids. ... I'm doing it my own way and according to what works for my student.”

### **Few Older Adults Are Familiar with After-School Opportunities**

Just as the after-school leaders had not thought about the potential of involving older adults in their programs, most of the older adults in the focus groups were surprised to hear about the expansion of after-school programs and the potential opportunities for service. Their comments indicated interest in learning more, but at the same time many were candid in sharing reservations and some negative preconceptions about the programs.

*Older adults shared some negative preconceptions about after-school programs.*

Some participants had the idea that after school programs are for “unsafe and troubled kids.” Some imagined after-school programs to be noisy environments, full of children left by uninvolved parents or assigned by

schools that could not offer proper homework assistance. They expected that the work would involve babysitting for misbehaving children rather than nurturing interests and opportunities. In each focus group, one or more older adults acknowledged that they would

...have to get over the [mistaken] idea that the kids are bad, that they're troubled, that the school is lousy, and they're in after-school programs because the school can't handle them.

One participant candidly wondered whether people like her would be able to overcome their stereotypes and preconceptions:

Being a teacher and mother... the idea of working with tired children after school doesn't sound all that appealing. The perception is there is chaos and it would not be a pleasant experience. Can you change that?

Nearly half of the older adults we talked with had been managers or professionals in their working years. When asked about working in non-teaching roles after school, the focus group participants showed interest in possibilities related to program leadership, information campaigns, grant writing, or mentoring for after-school staff. However, virtually none had given any previous thought to the idea of lending their skills within after-school programs:

Older volunteers don't think about the after-school period.... They don't recognize that there's a need there. And I'm sure that if they are thinking about it they are thinking the kids are too rambunctious.... Kids are vim and vinegar ... so not everyone has the energy. But when you say, "staff work," that would attract some people who don't think they have the energy to work with kids.

Recognizing that not all older adults will readily gravitate to after-school programs, the focus-group discussions explored the types of recruiting efforts, participation incentives, and organizational arrangements that help engage and retain older adults in after-school programs and other arenas. We turn next to the findings on those topics.

## **Recruitment Requires Advertising Campaigns and Personal Appeals**

Focus group contributors urged after-school leaders to "get the word out" more creatively by mounting aggressive marketing campaigns. Several business owners said that after-school advocates should "really lay it out there" through skillful marketing that targets both national and local audiences, and makes clear why and how older adults are needed:

If you had an ad show great pictures of volunteers our age who are really helping out in a lot of different ways—not just reading.... You’ve got to target your ad.... And it’s got to answer the questions we’ve been talking about—you know, why it is and what we’d do.

Focus group participants recommended a “massive recruitment effort” with some “serious p.r.” that makes clear how older adults can contribute in new ways after school. Such a campaign, one said, would “pitch the idea, the need, and the opportunity.”

Older adults who have worked in after-school programs reported that they were actively recruited to help with specific jobs—repairing the facility to make it safe for kids, advising on grant writing or a public relations campaign, or supporting direct work with children. One explained that the program director in her community sets an example of successful recruitment:

[She is] not ashamed of telling us what specific things they could use, and she doesn’t beat around the bush... So you’ve just got to articulate the need and match the need to the [available] people.”

*A “massive recruitment campaign” should “pitch the idea, the need, and the opportunity.”*

## **Effective Incentives Include Recognition and Modest Compensation**

Many older adults, those who participate in after-school programs and those who are active in other sectors, cited the value of recognition for their contributions. Simple appreciation was the most consistently mentioned incentive for volunteering. Among the public thank-yous that the participants said they valued were:

- Small symbolic gifts (e.g., items made by children)
- Public appreciation in community newspapers or local newsletters
- Gatherings (meals, parties) to pay tribute to their work
- Awards ceremonies

Other intangible incentives that mattered were the camaraderie among volunteers and the opportunity to do non-trivial work. One focus group contributor explained that her experience working with Common Cause had been especially positive for these reasons:

They had people who were really attached to one another and the projects they were working on, and we met a lot of interesting people. They fed us and encouraged cross-volunteer connections, and gave us some real responsibility doing polling and data gathering.

Although we asked about stipends as an incentive, it was difficult to gauge the extent to which these older adults wanted or needed financial compensation for their service. In the focus groups, participants across the socioeconomic spectrum said that money was not the issue for them personally. Some said that “other people” might need stipends. It was not uncommon for a person to suggest: “It doesn’t make the difference in my volunteering but, for a few people, it does make a difference.” In a more private setting, or with the anonymity of a written survey, more of them might have expressed a need for compensation.

While saying they did not need stipends, focus group participants pointed to the “hard realities” that confront older adults on limited fixed incomes. A former top administrator in a city agency noted that agency policies should realistically address individual and community needs:

Seniors are getting poorer every year. . . . As a result, I think stipends help a great deal. . . . They may be limited for those who receive SSI, but they are not limited for those earning Social Security.

Another older adult added:

Elders need to be respected fiscally because they have fiscal responsibilities the same as others. Sometimes they have more. This society defines persons at a certain age in their lives as being financially secure, but for a lot of us, that's just not the case.

More often, participants spoke of appreciating incentives that included relatively minor outlays:

- Transportation assistance (reimbursement for gas, taxi vouchers for traveling home after dark)
- A credit card or stipend for supply costs
- Free meals or snacks
- Accident and liability insurance
- Assistance with the procedures and fees for security clearance and fingerprinting

Older adults commented that financial help in the form of transportation vouchers or “a small charge card” to purchase gas, supplies, and materials would be appreciated. Taxi vouchers to make winter commuting feel less risky had appeal. A participant who works in a community-based program reported that her organization “has accident and liability insurance on us. I think it’s comforting.” Some said that Foster Grandparents programs are popular because they distribute stipends to buy groceries or gas.

One focus group participant proposed the idea of offering older adults the option of either accepting a stipend or donating the stipend to the program:

If had a choice between taking a stipend or giving it to the school or a program, I would opt to give it to the school. If you do give it as a choice... then the people that need it, they'd get it and others like me could give it back.

## **After-School Programs Must Have an Infrastructure to Support Volunteer or Part-time Contributors**

Focus group participants, like after-school leaders, emphasized good management and coordination as central to the success of programs that engage the talents of seniors. They said programs must make arrangements for active coordination of volunteers or part-time workers; flexibility in time commitments; and appropriate training and orientation.

Experience Corps has an established tradition of providing its members with significant amounts of support, and has made available a Toolkit (Experience Corps, 2004) to guide programs in developing strategies for service. The wisdom of this investment in coordination was borne out in the focus groups held for this study, as well as in a recent, systematic evaluation of Experience Corps programs in three cities (Raley, 2006). Key factors that Raley cited as critical to program success included day-to-day coordination by Experience Corps staff and school staff, direct instructional guidance for participants, and a “strategic team environment” in which participants learned from and supported each other.

This report echoes the findings in the UPS Foundation’s *Guide to Investing in Volunteer Resources Management* (2002). The UPS Foundation report provides a detailed assessment for determining the strengths and weaknesses of the organizational structure that exists to support volunteer efforts.

***“Having a well-run organization means a lot. We don’t have much patience for sitting around and waiting for something to do.”***

In our focus groups, the older adults who spoke highly of their recent experience in organizations pointed to the organizations’ capacity to support their contributions. They repeatedly cited the importance of having a staff member with coordination responsibilities. As one said:

You need someone on board who knows how to work with older adults, to coordinate the workload, and to smooth transitions. I don’t think incentives are the issue here, but having a well-run organization means a lot. We don’t have much patience for sitting around and waiting for something to do.

Participants insisted that organizations had to make it easy for them to contribute. One offered succinctly: “Give us the tools, but you do the paper

work—and make it easy for us to give what we have.” Experience Corps received praise in this regard:

Every other place I went to was so complicated, there was so much bureaucracy, but Experience Corps made it easy for us to work with them. We did the finger printing and the application here on site.

Other participants pointed to the importance of the organization’s capacity to manage flexible volunteer schedules:

You need a paid staff who can manage volunteers, because sometimes their commitment is episodic. I can’t always give a day a week. Elders are much more active than they used to be. Some want to work on a regular schedule; others are like me—want to work when we have the time. It’s really crucial to have good staffing to make the varied schedules and styles work.

Flexibility was important to almost every participant. Older adults today have made commitments in many arenas and, while they want to help, they want to do so on their own schedule. As one said, “Several people have asked me, but I will not work more than four hours a day, four days a week.” For some older adults, scheduling flexibility enables them to work many hours a few days a week for a short period of time; for others, it allows a commitment of fewer hours over a longer, continuous time period.

Commenting on the type of training they would want, participants said it should address the responsibilities they would have in working with children and provide a chance for inexperienced individuals to practice the needed skills. At the same time, they said the training should recognize and build upon the skills and knowledge that they already possess. Several focus-group participants argued not for training, but for orientations that make clear the organization and program mission and specifics of what work is expected of them. As one put it:

Orientation is the concept—not training. Orientation is a vehicle for understanding the organization and where you fit in.... Training feels too formal, and regimented.

### **Some Demographic Variation Was Evident**

Although we did not ask in detail about the personal backgrounds of individual participants, we could observe some variations in the types of service the older adults preferred to provide, depending on their own life experiences. In particular, those who had themselves succeeded as students or had worked as teachers were more interested in teaching and tutoring:

We like seeing the light turn on in their eyes and faces when they see a science experiment explain whatever theory they're doing.....

After 40 years of teaching, it was totally delightful not to have anything to do with discipline, but I could make my own way. I created a resource room on my own [tutoring in advanced math]. I just shut that door and, because of my experience, I was able to run with [the math class], but the children did test me!

Those who had struggled in school were more interested in sharing their "survival skills," and in listening to youth, serving them meals, or taking them on field trips

I want to make a difference with my group of children, that's my focus. If I could reach just one, if I can start with one it will rub off to the next, I want to make a difference and I want to be good at it, I want them to feel good about themselves, and I want them to wake up and say that they can't wait to see me.

If you make them feel good about themselves, they are going to want to learn. I tell them, the world is a quilt, and they look at me like where is she going with this. And I say you have to hold the quilt together with something and think of yourself as that strong stitch that holds that quilt together. But they understood that, it doesn't matter if you have those new shoes or that new shirt. They are eight years old.

On the other hand, in talking with just a few individuals with specialized skills who had wanted to bring those skills to volunteer roles in structured programs, we found that a mismatch had occurred, and that they felt overqualified and underused. Two former volunteers in schools described their frustrations. One of these active retirees was a former professor and the other was a former lawyer, retrained in her retirement as a special educator. Both had wanted to serve children—they initially thought—but were frustrated to find that they were not free to work proactively. When they were asked only to use worksheets or read simple books with the children, both lost interest. One said:

I'm a professor of political science. I could work with policy, writing, data collection, but [the people in the school setting] haven't called on me to do that... I think I have a lot to offer them. They were not using my skills or interests. They could have. I'm well educated, and if they really let me work with kids freely, I think I could have done a better job. But we were restricted to these little techniques which were rather rote and didn't work well with my kids.

The other former volunteer described her frustrations with the training she received:

The program was run by young, inexperienced education majors.... They pretty much told us what to do, and ... they were completely off the mark on how to work with learning disabled kids. Fortunately, some of the tutors paid no attention to their training at all and did what they pleased. Most of us did a combination of what we pleased and what we were told.... One of the young college girls admonished me to stop letting my second grader use manipulatives to do her addition! Can you believe that? I explained, probably not very patiently, that children need to use manipulatives until they really understand why answers are correct and learn how to figure out math solutions.

This story of exasperation illustrates the problem identified in a commentary by Robert Egger, who wrote that nonprofit organizations may have to adjust to the expectations of highly educated and skilled older professional:

Will former heads of corporate human resources departments be satisfied painting walls or sorting food donations? Or would they rather use their skills and experience to help build the infrastructure and long-term capacity of an organization that had been unable to afford such a professional? Military personnel, project managers, tech support staff, nurses, mechanics, accountants, and engineers—they're coming, too. Will nonprofits have meaningful opportunities for them? (MetLife/Civic Ventures, 2006, p. 18)

## **Conclusion: New Issues, New Ideas**

As after-school programs expand in number and extend their services, they face challenges in staffing. At the same time, a growing cohort of older adults expresses enthusiasm for serving the community and working with children and youth. What are the prospects for making a good match, and what can be done to improve the prospects?

Our data suggest that a lack of information on both sides is a major impediment to engaging older adults in after-school programs. Program leaders, despite the staffing needs they contend with, have not thought about the capabilities that older adults could bring. Older adults are unfamiliar with the growth in the after-school movement and with the purposeful, well-organized environment now found in many programs. Stereotypes flourish in the absence of good information, and the program leaders' stereotypical notions of older adults are as much of a problem as the older adults' stereotypical notions of out-of-control children.

When after-school programs have used older adults, they have done so in limited capacities—typically as tutors or mentors. They have not tapped older

adults' expertise as business managers and leaders, financial experts, writers, or development specialists, and they have not called adequately on experienced teachers, curriculum writers, trainers, or managers.

For after-school program leaders, who are often overwhelmed with the challenges of keeping their programs afloat on modest budgets, creative ideas about staffing may be the farthest things from their minds. In the interviews, most expressed interest in the potential that older adults represent, although most also acknowledged never having thought about this potential before. This suggests that the field would benefit from help in setting up the infrastructure for recruiting and supporting older adults as program contributors.

Many older adults, although not all, enjoy the opportunity for a personal connection with children and youth. For many, tokens of recognition and modest stipends are incentives for participation. A program can retain their involvement through small incentives such as paying for gasoline or public transportation or by providing meals on site. Most often, in the focus groups, a commitment to community service and to children's well-being appeared to be the strongest driving forces for participation in after-school as well as school-day programs.

A well-managed program can secure older adults' long-term commitment by dedicating some staff time to volunteer management, by offering flexibility in scheduling, and by providing training that is well tailored to the skills and interests that the older adults bring.

It was clear from the focus groups that there is untapped potential in the older adult population, which neither after-school programs nor their potential recruits have considered. Older adults will always be valued for their capacity to nurture, teach, mentor, or simply enjoy children and youth. But many older adults are interested in applying their years of management and leadership, can lend a hand with grant writing, or can oversee the business office. Others are happy to serve as receptionists or to support administrative operations. Their experience could be particularly valuable to after-school programs, where the need for these skills is acute.

***It was clear from the focus groups that there is untapped potential, which neither the programs nor their potential recruits have considered.***

The evidence from our interviews and focus groups suggests the availability of a rich human resource pool for after-school programs. Tapping into the potential, however, requires resources and a systematic strategy. From the growing body of literature on engaging older adults in community work, the after-school world can learn about how to organize recruitment campaigns and how to place and manage willing participants in varied types of work. To achieve this goal—and, indeed, to make the best use of a workforce of all ages—the following recommendations should be considered:

- ***Strengthen the infrastructure.*** After-school programs need a developed infrastructure that includes paid staff to oversee recruitment, placement, coordination, training, and supervision.
- ***Challenge stereotypes.*** Contrary to stereotypes, adults over 55 belong to more than one generation; they have diverse talents and interests; and they are willing to make different levels and kinds of commitments. After-school programs, contrary to stereotypes, increasingly offer rich and well-structured programming to foster healthy development and learning. If program leaders knew more about older adults and older adults knew more about programs, they could more readily see the potential fit.
- ***Recruit for talent, not for age.*** Today's after-school programs are especially in need of the talents older adults have accumulated. Skillful marketing about the varied opportunities in after-school programming can stimulate interest in opportunities that few older adults have previously considered.
- ***Enlist experienced individuals in administrative or managerial roles.*** Not every contributor to an after-school program works directly with children and youth. Older adults with skills in fund raising, communications, research, neighborhood relations, staff development, and many other arenas could make valuable contributions as part-time paid workers or volunteers.
- ***Reward service.*** While not every volunteer seeks a stipend or reimbursement, many older adults who have valuable experience to share with children can use modest assistance, stipends, or reimbursement for their services. Nearly all value the intangible rewards that come from public thank-yous and recognition.
- ***Use existing model practices.*** Teaming up with supportive national or local organizations can enable after-school programs to learn best practices for recruiting and managing a workforce that is diverse in age. Intermediary organizations like Experience Corps are skilled in providing training, orientation, and the other administrative functions that support older adults and the programs in which they contribute. Thus, despite their modest budgets, after-school programs may be better able to benefit from the developed talents of an ever-growing older adult population.

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## **Appendix**

# Focus Groups with Older Adults

## Participant Information\*

Information Element	Percent
<b>GENDER</b>	
Female	68
Male	32
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>	
African American	26
Hispanic	4
Asian	7
Caucasian	63
<b>AGE</b>	
Less than 55	8
55 – 60	17
61 – 70	35
71 – 80	28
80 plus	11
<b>EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND</b>	
High School/GED	12
Community college	34
Four-year college	19
Some graduate work	10
Master's degree or higher	25
<b>PRE-RETIREMENT EMPLOYMENT</b>	
Service work (e.g., police, firefighter; non-professional government service)	15
Clerical/office	10
Sales	4
Technical/Semi-skilled	24
Professional	33
Management	13

\*NOTE: Percentages for gender and ethnicity are based on 108 participants; percentages for age, education, and pre-retirement employment are based on self-reported information from 89 participants.