



Older Americans renewing communities.

RespectAbility Web Survey Executive Summary

March 2005

Background

In June 2003, the Atlantic Philanthropies engaged the National Council on the Aging (NCOA) and Lipman Hearne to develop a research program to support the NCOA's RespectAbility Initiative. The findings of this research are intended to shape the work of a cadre of journalists whose support will inform strategies of the Initiative and other civic engagement efforts of participating organizations.

This third phase of the research program involved a Web-based survey of local executive directors, program directors, and volunteer coordinators of affiliates of the 20 national nonprofit organizations participating in the project. The focus of the survey was to gain insights and understanding about the readiness and capacity of non-profit organizations to tap the potential of older adults as a resource to improve their organizational functioning and expand or improve the delivery of critical services. The objectives of the survey research were:

- To assess local organizations' levels of engagement with older adults as volunteers and workers;
- To examine the roles of older adult volunteers and workers in developing and delivering these organizations' programs and services;
- To investigate the potential contributions older adults might make to organizational efforts;
- To reveal barriers and challenges that recruiting older adults into volunteer and paid staff positions poses for these organizations; and
- To uncover policies and procedures that would improve these organizations' ability to tap the talents and experiences of older adults.

Methodology

Beginning in the spring of 2004, NCOA invited the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from over 80 national non-profits to commit their organization to participate in the Web-based survey based on their known usage of volunteers, the size of their affiliate networks and their national stature. Twenty of the eighty organizations self-selected to participate. The CEOs of these 20 national non-profits then developed an invitation list of affiliate leaders

from their network to complete the survey. 1,883 local executive directors, program directors, and volunteer coordinators from the affiliate networks of the 20 national nonprofit organizations participated in the Web-based survey. From that pool of potential participants, 811 completed the survey, for a 43 percent response rate.

The use of the Internet as the data collection tool of choice was based on its effectiveness in gathering data from a respondent pool that was geographically dispersed throughout the country. NCOA did not receive a single request from a prospective respondent to complete the survey in a non electronic format, though such a format was available.

Local affiliates of the following organizations participated in the survey:

- Alliance for Children and Families
- Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
- Boys & Girls Club of America
- Catholic Charities USA
- Faith in Action
- Generations United
- Girl Scouts USA
- Goodwill Industries International
- Interfaith Care Partners
- Junior Achievement
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
- National Association of Foster Grandparent Program Directors
- National Association of Retired and Senior Volunteer Program Directors
- National Institute of Senior Centers
- Salvation Army of the U.S.
- Shepherd's Centers
- Volunteers of America
- Women in Community Service
- YMCA of the USA

For the purposes of the survey, these organizations were classified in several ways:

- By mission: faith-based, senior-based, youth-based, employment-based, community-based
- By the existence of a volunteer coordinator
- By number of volunteers in the local organization

These categories produced segments through which answers to the survey questions were analyzed.

Key Findings

Please note that the findings from this survey can only be generalized to the sample size of 20 national non-profits organizations that participated and not to the overall non-profit sector.

Volunteer Profile

- Ninety-five percent of the respondents to this survey reported that their organization currently has volunteers. Slightly over one-third (37 percent) have a full-time paid volunteer coordinator and just over 20 percent have a part-time paid volunteer coordinator. Over one-third (37 percent) reported not having a volunteer coordinator.
- The age of the volunteers was highly related to the type of organization: Youth-based organizations were most likely to have volunteers 18-39 years old while senior-based organizations were more likely to have volunteers aged 65 or over. The age of faith- and community-based volunteers was more evenly distributed throughout the different age groups; employment-based volunteers were most likely to be under the age of 55.
- Volunteers were generally viewed in a positive light. For example, respondents were asked to rate their volunteers across a set of characteristics using a 5-point scale. In survey research such as this, a characteristic considered strong when 80 percent or more of respondents answer “4” or “5.” In this case, three characteristics were strong: *They want to help and produce results* (84 percent); *they want to feel connected to the organization* (84 percent); and *they are highly committed, reliable, and dependable* (83 percent).

Volunteer Teams

- Sixty-one percent of the respondents reported that their organizations use volunteer teams. Faith-based organizations and those with volunteer coordinators were more likely than others to make use of volunteer teams. Those who

organized their volunteers into teams reported a positive impact in the following areas: *Satisfaction on the part of the person involved; impact of volunteer efforts; improved delivery of service; and the organization's image in the community.*

Organizational Practices

- Respondents were queried about their systems for working with older adult volunteers. Several aspects were explored: *development of new service opportunities and roles; recruitment; screening, assessment, and placement; orientation and training; and performance feedback/evaluation.* About half reported having these practices in place. Senior-based organizations, more than the other types, approach relationships with older adult volunteers systematically. As one might expect, those with volunteer coordinators were more likely to have practices to engage older volunteers.
- Lack of staff (i.e., volunteer coordinator) and staff training appear to be key barriers to implementing these practices with older adult volunteers. Relatively few saw administrative costs as a barrier and/or doubted the value-added of such practices. The survey provided a list of barriers for respondents to consider in implementing the volunteer practices. In many instances, respondents indicated that “none” of the items on the list were barriers. This suggests that there are other barriers, not identified in this survey, inhibiting their development and/or implementation.
- Respondents were asked “if all the barriers to working with older adult volunteers were removed, how ready would your organization be to make improvements in the following [service] area?” While two-thirds said their organizations were ready or very ready to make improvements, 28 to 33 percent said their organization would not institute these practices even in the absence of barriers. These results were consistent across type of organization and whether or not the organization had a volunteer coordinator.

Attitudes toward Older Adult Volunteers

- A series of survey questions addressed attitudes toward volunteer contributions. In general, no matter what type of organization, local leaders tended to agree about the “potential” contribution of older adult volunteers. Respondents from faith- and senior-based organizations were more likely to agree about the potential, while those from youth- and employment-based organizations were typically less likely to agree. Nearly all respondents in four of the five types of organizations agreed that older adult volunteers can help organizations fulfill their mission and meet their goals (employment-based organizations were less likely to agree). The vast majority of respondents from youth-, faith-, senior-, and community-based organizations agreed or strongly agreed that older adult volunteers could *increase the visibility of organizations, build community understanding, and strengthen outreach*.
- For the most part, a high percentage of respondents from the surveyed organizations agreed that older adult volunteers allow organizations to offer services they could not otherwise provide. While three-fourths of the respondents from youth- and community-based organizations agreed that older adult volunteers are effective in allowing organizations to expand services, fewer than half agreed that this statement describes their volunteers or that their organization is a leader in taking advantage of this opportunity.
- Seventy-five to 90 percent of respondents from faith-, senior-, and community-based organizations agreed that older adult volunteers could help reduce costs. Respondents from these organizations were also more likely to agree that older adult volunteers save staff time. They were more inclined than not to agree that this was true of their organization and to say their organizations were leaders in this area. Officials from youth- and employment-based organizations were, on the whole, unlikely to make such claims.

- Across the board, respondents appeared more skeptical that older adult volunteers could be leaders in organizations than they were about any other potential contribution of older volunteers.
- Respondents from organizations with a volunteer coordinator were more likely than those without a volunteer coordinator to agree that older adult volunteers could make these types of contributions to organizations, that their volunteers made these kinds of contributions, and that their organization was a leader in this area. In addition, respondents from organizations with 50 or more volunteers were more likely than others to agree that older volunteers could make these contributions, that these contributions were made by their volunteers, and that these organizations demonstrated leadership in these areas.

Hiring Practices

- Respondents were asked to what degree hiring practices changed in response to changes in racial/ethnic and aging demographics in the community. Overall, 44 percent have made changes in response to changes in the racial/ethnic composition of the community. One-third made changes in response to aging demographics.
- Youth-, community-, and employment-based organizations appeared to be more responsive than faith- and senior-based organizations to changes in racial/ethnic diversity. On the other hand, faith- and senior-based organizations were more responsive to changes in the aging demographics.

Resource Allocation

- When asked in a yes/no format if their organization pools resources with other non-profit organizations, it became clear that pooling resources was not common practice for most of the organizations represented in this study. *Best practice information* was the only resource widely shared (59 percent), most often by senior-based organizations, those with volunteer coordinators, and those with 50 or more volunteers. *Developing a volunteer recognition process* was shared by 26 percent, again, most often by senior-based organizations, those with volunteer coordinators, and those with 50 or more volunteers. Pooling resources with a direct impact on finances (provide transportation, purchase liability insurance, and hiring a volunteer coordinator) was much less frequent. Interest in pooling resources in the future was also low. Forty-one percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their organization would be willing to pay to *retain a trained older adult as a volunteer coordinator*. Employment-based organizations were significantly less likely than other types of organizations to agree they would make this investment. Fewer respondents agreed that their organization would be willing to pay for *assistance in developing new volunteer opportunities* and *strategies for marketing to older adults* (33 percent and 29 percent, respectively).

Strategic Issues and Implications

The survey revealed several salient issues connected to the recruitment and retention of older adult workers and volunteers. Particularly important are conclusions that confirmed or enhanced the findings of the in-depth interview and focus group phases of the research. Those include the following findings, which are examined in greater detail in the “Detailed Findings” section of this report:

- Local executive directors, program directors, and volunteer coordinators did not show much interest in improving their organizations’ capacity to attract and retain older adults as workers or volunteers. The priorities of local executive directors, program directors, and volunteer coordinators appeared to be focused on the need to attend to daily operational issues, meeting critical and growing needs for services, and the search for resources for sustainability. Like the focus groups, the Web survey showed that developing strategies to tap the resources of older adults through paid and unpaid positions was beneath the radars of most local nonprofit officials. Those who responded to the Web survey, on the whole, painted a picture of inertia at the local level. One response was especially telling: About a third of the respondents said that their organizations would not be prepared to improve in basic areas affecting engagement with older adult volunteers, *even if all the barriers to doing so were removed*. Meanwhile, 740 of the 811 respondents, or 91 percent, could not comment on any practices instituted by their organizations to hire older adult workers.
- National and local leaders need to be convinced that taking time away from on-going management and operational problem solving and directing time and resources away from mission and service provision will be worth the investment. The business case is not evident to organizational leaders that older adult volunteers or retention of older workers is causally related to their success.

- There were indications that local nonprofit officials acknowledge that demographic trends will affect service delivery. Several responses to the Web survey shored up the connection between aging and service drawn by many focus group participants. In particular, local directors of senior-based and faith-based organizations, whose constituencies are largely older Americans, were the most likely to say that their organizations' strategic plans address the aging population; leaders of youth-, community- and employment-based groups were far less likely to agree. That indicates an attention to older adults as service recipients, rather than as volunteers or workers.
- Leaders at all levels acknowledged the need for improved and more professional planning, leading, managing, and administering volunteer and service initiatives of older adults. Resources for new and professionally trained staff are necessary if non-profit organizations are to tap the resource potential of older adults, increase delivery and quality of mission critical services, and strengthen internal organizational capacity.
- Staff resources such as human resource specialists assigned to develop paid and unpaid opportunities within and throughout the organizations are necessary to the effective deployment of older adults. The role of volunteer coordinators, while essential to the effective deployment of older adult volunteers, may be too narrow or limited a position with insufficient authority to engage the leadership or to offer continuing justification for a strategy in this area. Just as focus group participants emphasized the need for volunteer coordinators in their local organizations, respondents to the Web survey stressed the necessity of having a trained staff member to manage volunteers. Indeed, the lack of a volunteer coordinator was the most frequently cited reason for the failure to engage older adults.
- Because volunteer coordinators (or individuals in similar leadership positions, with broader responsibility and authority) play such a pivotal role, a national program to train and to certify volunteer coordinators or human resource development specialists could be an important resource for local nonprofit organizations. Such

an initiative, whether driven by NCOA, another existing national body (we are aware of the Association of Volunteer Administration, but can not comment on their credibility or expertise in this area), or a completely new group, would establish standards and enhance recruitment and retention strategies for volunteer coordinators. Specific programs addressing recruitment, screening, placement, training, roles, management, retention, and recognition of older adult volunteers could be developed. Thanks to these national standards, local organizations could more easily engage both paid and unpaid volunteer coordinators, all of whom will have undergone similar training or accreditation.

- Collaboration is a strategic priority that has very little practical impact or support. More than 80 percent of the respondents who responded to questions about their organization's strategic plans, attested to organizational strategic planning that encourages collaboration with other nonprofits or with government or philanthropic organizations. Somewhat fewer had plans that specifically addressed racial and ethnic changes in the community (61 percent) or the aging of the population (55 percent). For the large majority of them, that call to collaborate plays out only in the exchange of best practice information. While 59 percent of the respondents said that their organizations shared best practice information with other groups in their communities, less than 30 percent agreed that they pooled resources in other areas. The response from small volunteer organizations was particularly striking: According to local directors and volunteer coordinators who answered the survey, almost half of the local organizations with fewer than 25 volunteers do not pool their resources for any activity. Nor do many organizations appear to want to join forces. No more than 29 percent of all the respondents said that they would be interested in combining efforts on transportation, volunteer recognition, background checks, best practice information, volunteer coordination, or liability insurance.
- Local nonprofit leaders need to be convinced that collaboration is to their benefit. Not only does cooperation among local nonprofits carry financial benefits and potentially improve service, it is also increasingly required by supporting bodies. Funders are increasingly demanding that local and national groups work together

and avoid duplicating their efforts, and they are becoming reluctant to offer support to those organizations that remain isolated. This reality does not appear to have influenced the actions of local nonprofit leaders, so third-party intervention might be necessary to enlighten people at the local level. That outside authority could become a gathering place for local executive directors, program directors, and volunteer coordinators; it could train those nonprofit officials in effective collaboration strategies and tactics; and it could take an advocacy role, promoting an agenda of cooperation and touting best practices in that area.

- National organizations can create forums in which local officials share their insights. Wide circulation of insights and examples could help shape new modes of engaging older adults. For example, disseminating stories of effective “episodic” engagements could convince other organizations to broaden their conceptions of volunteer roles. Looser—and more useful—notions of staff positions might grow out of case studies of employment practices. Anecdotes highlighting clear intergenerational communications policies might ease discomfort for staff and volunteers involved in sometimes sensitive conversations. And details of nonprofit organizations’ productive relationships with corporations or professional associations might encourage others to tap those resources for highly qualified volunteers.
- Older volunteers are generally seen in service, rather than professional, roles. National leaders who participated in the individual interviews and local leaders who assembled in focus groups were quick to recount stories of older adults who became deeply involved in professional roles within their organizations. Examples of older adults revamping organizations’ accounting or information-technology systems were widespread. The survey paints a different picture. Through their responses, local nonprofit directors and volunteer coordinators showed little confidence in the leadership abilities of older adults, as they were least likely to cite team, project, or strategic leadership among potential and actual contributions of older adult volunteers. That suggests that local leaders view older adults through a lens of traditional thinking about volunteering (service providers), and

not as leaders, project coordinators, advocates or in other roles of directing efforts or shaping strategies.

- A case should be made for older adult involvement on executive and professional levels. In addition to improving collaboration among nonprofits and deepening the impact of volunteer coordinator-type positions, national organizations have a role to play in reshaping notions of volunteer engagement. They can deploy placement systems and promotional activities to spur local organizations to involve more people in their board activities or in unfunded professional roles. Specifically, NCOA and/or other organizations can create a national service to recruit and deploy executive volunteers as board members, and they can promote ways of incorporating other highly skilled volunteers and workers into the operations of local nonprofits. Some local nonprofits have strategies in place, for example, to recruit writers, Web designers, or accounting professionals into unpaid positions; national publicity of these practices would show how expanded definitions of volunteerism and paid employment create clear benefits for local groups.
- Local nonprofit leaders appear prepared to develop more flexible engagements for volunteers. “Episodic” opportunities for volunteers, involving participation on a special volunteer day or other one-time projects, are available in the majority of participating local organizations. Indeed, 64 percent of the survey respondents said that their organizations made such engagements available. That suggests that the national call for increased flexibility, voiced by many of the participants in individual interviews and focus groups, is, to some degree, being heard and acted upon at the local level. Still, an even greater proportion of respondents, 69 percent, said that their organizations feature “steady” opportunities, characterized by regularly scheduled activities taking two to five hours. There are clearly traditional ways of thinking about volunteer opportunities working alongside flexible, short-term, and episodic engagements.
- Although the research was designed to gather input from “service” oriented organizations, the engagement of older adult volunteers and workers should be viewed and portrayed as a national issue affecting people of all beliefs and

ideologies. The set of organizations that participated in this research was dominated by those that provide service to underprivileged, ill, or aging people. As worthwhile as their causes may be, these groups are not the only nonprofits that might benefit from the increased involvement of older adults, and they are certainly not the only organizations to which older adults are attracted. Arts and cultural institutions need docents and guides; institutes of higher learning, as well as secondary and elementary schools, can use help raising funds, maintaining grounds, and performing other vital functions; local election boards need people to staff polling places and promote voter registration; Rotary clubs, lodges, and fraternal organizations rely on volunteers to deliver and extend their multiple services; even organizations like the United States Golf Association would be hard-pressed to keep going without volunteers. Such organizations and institutions should be just as involved in initiatives to tap the talents of older adults as are those focused on poverty and illness. It is important that representatives of these types of organizations be involved in this discussion. Intentional or unintentional exclusion of these groups has the potential to result in a less than desirable response to this matter of profound national import.

- Demographic trends are playing out in ranks of local nonprofits. Like the focus group portion of the research, the Web survey revealed that growing numbers of local nonprofit leaders are approaching retirement. Among the respondents, nearly 40 percent were 55 years old or older, while 40 percent had been with their current organizations for ten years or more. It is possible that experienced local officials were more likely to answer the survey than were their younger counterparts, but it is more likely that the survey respondents reflect the overall workforce of nonprofit leaders—who are themselves moving closer and closer to retirement.
- Finally, we offer this suggestion: Perhaps a promising way to promote the engagement of older volunteers involves emphasizing the personal journey of local nonprofit leaders. As increasing numbers of nonprofit leaders move toward retirement, they are beginning to pose the question, “What am I going to do with the rest of my life?” That realization, made by participants in individual interviews

and in focus groups, ties the strategic issue of the aging population to the personal experience of local and national nonprofit leaders. An emphasis on this personal connection to the issue might encourage local and national nonprofit leaders to relate better to the vast pool of recent retirees and near-retirees. As a result, more effective messages and strategies for engaging older volunteers and workers might spring from this common ground.