Older Volunteer Workers a Boom, not a Bust

By Julianne Couch | Posted: Wednesday, February 18, 2015 3:00 pm

Many communities across the country face the same sort of human service problems. Too many people with needs for things like better education and access to health care, but not enough resources to make those things happen.

At the same time, a less visible set of needs surrounds skilled older adults, who are retired or have time to contribute but don’t know how to connect with individuals or organizations needing their help.

Older adults are an untapped resource in many communities, with a wealth of experience and knowledge, as well as the time to share it. Communities and organizations around the country are recruiting adults 55 and older to volunteer in local initiatives. In some programs, their work is rewarded through stipends or other benefits. In other cases, their time is compensated by the experience itself.

Communities and organizations who wish to access volunteer workers of any age can connect through the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). This is a federal agency established in 1993. Typically non-profit organizations, individuals or faith-based organizations seeking older workers will apply for funding. According to CNCS, it engages more than 5 million Americans in service through its core programs, which include AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. Both of these programs serve as umbrellas for other programs.

The CNCS operates in all 50 states, and Colorado is typical of many. It has a large metropolitan area composed of many municipalities, stitched together along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. That is the Denver area, but there also are many mid-sized metropolitan areas and small rural communities in the state. Each has different needs and different resources to apply to its human service needs. The Colorado Senior Corps website currently lists more than 1,300 opportunities it says are great for people 55 and older. Volunteer opportunities exist at approximately 940 locations around the state. The Girl Scouts of Colorado were a recent source of numerous listings, seeking volunteers to work with youth in communities across the state. Other recent listings were from Elder Helpers, which seeks older adults to volunteer as helpers for elderly individuals who need assistance with daily activities.

2014 Day of Service
A group of Serve Colorado volunteers, including Colorado Lt. Governor Joe Garcia (fourth from left) at a 2014 Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service event.
“More than 8,900 people of all ages and backgrounds are helping to meet local needs, strengthen communities and increase civic engagement through national service in Colorado,” the organization stated, and this year CNCS will commit more than $30 million to support Colorado communities through the AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. “Through a unique public-private partnership, this federal investment will leverage an additional $12,580,000 in other resources to strengthen community impact, build local support, and increase return on taxpayer dollars,” CNCS added in its volunteer information.

Lindsay Dolce is executive director of Serve Colorado, that state’s CNCS state-level partner. She explained that State Service Commissions — of which Serve Colorado is one — provide CNCS funding to AmeriCorps state programs through annual grant competitions. Grants are made either directly to an organization or through an intermediary group that handles the distribution of grant funding.

CNCS grants provide assistance to programs to recruit, train and supervise AmeriCorps members meeting critical community needs in the areas of education, disaster services, health, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity and service to veterans and military families.

“In each state, there are different priorities. We’re able to pilot and try new programs within the state,” she said.

The AmeriCorps program might not be the first organization communities think about when considering older adult volunteer workers.

“AmeriCorps positions are typically held by younger people seeking Education Awards as partial compensation for their service,” Dolce said. “But in some cases, there are opportunities for older adults to serve.”

She explained that an AmeriCorps stint is typically 1,700 hours of service, but that most of the retiree positions are half-time slots of 900 hours.

Serve Colorado has supported older AmeriCorps workers, including those working in a program called Boomers Leading Change in Health. This program is part of a national organization created to provide adults 50 and older with “meaningful volunteer opportunities that will enable and empower them to affect significant social change,” they said. In the Denver area, the group’s focus is on health and healthcare. In other locations around the country, Boomers Leading Change has other specific missions, such as homelessness, literacy, access to healthy foods in under-served neighborhoods, at-risk youth and the environment.

“The Boomers program is really a great program,” Dolce said. “It is all about camaraderie among the members.”

According to the Denver area group, baby boomers are healthier, better-educated and more affluent than previous generations. In fact, they say, nearly a third of people in metropolitan Denver are baby boomers. Instead of focusing on what some might worry is the “graying of Denver,” Boomers Leading Change in Health claim that Denver is the “Boomer Capitol” of the United States. There might be some jostling for that crown, but currently nearly 300,000 people age 55 to 64 live in the metro area. During the next 20 years, that number will grow to more than 1 million. Meantime, nearly two-thirds of baby boomers in the Denver metropolitan area are employed, but nearly half of area baby boomers actively volunteer and
plan to continue doing so, the group said. And one point that should make health care administrators everywhere take note – according to Boomers Leading Change in Health, healthcare navigators help reduce hospital re-admission rates significantly.

"Older workers in this organization act as health navigators through hospital networks in serving individuals who need extra support," Dolce said, adding that she knows of one individual with Boomers Leading Change in Health who is working as a patient advocate. When the patient was facing particular challenges, the volunteer was able to go to the doctor's appointments and advocate for her. For instance, the volunteer was able to call ahead and arrange a longer appointment time for the patient. The patient also happened to be a Holocaust survivor. The volunteer saw signs of depression and spoke about it to the health care provider. The patient was able to access the care she needed, including medication and therapy, Dolce said, and "she is now 180 degrees better. The AmeriCorps advocate got her help."

Dolce described another older AmeriCorps volunteer worker who spoke Korean. She was able to navigate for a Korean patient who spoke little English. Although she was 55, the patient had never had a mammogram. The volunteer worker was able to get her an appointment.

"It turned out the woman had breast cancer, and the navigator was able to help her through it," Dolce said.

A few years ago it was easier to recruit volunteers to the AmeriCorps program, at all age levels, Dolce said, "Now as the economy has bounced back, there is more interest in people who are seeking the opportunity to find a fully paid job as opposed to a term of service. However, the interest continues to be there."

Another program Dolce oversees through Serve Colorado is the Colorado Reading Corps. Not all of its volunteers are over 55, she said, but many are. She recounted the story of a retired teacher who wanted to spend some of her retirement time helping people learn to read. The program allowed her to dedicate more time to individuals one-on-one, compared to what she experienced teaching in the school setting.

Alternatively, the CNCS program, called Senior Corp, is a traditional meeting place for communities or organizations seeking older volunteer workers, and for older adults with time and talent to give. Developed during the Kennedy administration, Senior Corps currently links more than 360,000 Americans to service opportunities. It is the umbrella organization for Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions and possibly its best known program, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

RSVP provides grants to qualified agencies and organizations for two purposes: engaging people 55 and older in volunteer service to meet critical community needs; and providing a high quality experience that will enrich the lives of volunteers. Some examples of RSVP service include organizing neighborhood watch programs; tutoring and mentoring disadvantaged or disabled youth; renovating homes; teaching English to immigrants; and assisting victims of natural disasters.
Senior Corps service does provide tangible benefits for volunteers. For instance, the Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion programs offer modest stipends and other ways to help offset the costs of volunteering. RSVP volunteers choose how, where and how often they want to serve, with commitments ranging from a few hours to 40 hours per week. Volunteers receive pre-service orientation and training from the organization where they will serve. Unlike other Senior Corps programs, RSVP volunteers do not receive monetary incentives, but sponsoring organizations may reimburse them for some costs incurred during service.

Senior Corps and its programs also are a presence in Colorado, Dolce said, although it is not administered through the Serve Colorado office. According to CNCS, more than 6,000 older adults contribute time to the organization. Foster Grandparents serve one-on-one as tutors and mentors to more than 2,700 young people who have special needs. Senior Companions help more than 960 homebound seniors and other adults maintain independence in their own homes. RSVP volunteers conduct safety patrols, renovate homes, protect the environment, tutor and mentor youth, respond to natural disasters and provide other services through more than 460 groups across Colorado.