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# Promoting Intergenerational Strategies: The Role of the Corporation for National Service

Harris Wofford

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**Authors:**Wofford, Harris

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**Abstract:** Provides information on the Corporation for National Service which works with thousands of nonprofit partners to promote intergenerational strategies. Examples of intergenerational programs supported by the corporation; Supporting roles of the corporation; Aspects about the involvement of older Americans in intergenerational programs that need more research.

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## **PROMOTING INTERGENERATIONAL STRATEGIES: THE ROLE OF THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE**

**A catalyst for corporations, foundations, and community groups.**

The United States has always relied on the generosity and commitment of its citizens to meet its challenges. Today millions of Americans volunteer every day, tutoring children, helping communities recover from natural disasters, restoring parks, and doing many other things to improve lives and bring people together.

Tapping citizen power will be even more important as we enter a new century and a new era of limited government. Just because government is being reduced, it does not mean our problems are going away. Indeed, many of the problems facing our nation--from crime and drugs to illiteracy and homelessness--are mounting.

To meet these challenges, we need to unleash the greatest power our country has--the energy and idealism of our people. Above all, we must tap the power of 60 million Americans over age 55, who bring to service what no other age group can--a lifetime of skills and experience as workers, parents, grandparents, and citizens.

The Corporation for National Service, through the programs of the National Senior Service Corps, Learn and Serve America, and Ameri-Corps, is working with thousands of nonprofit partners to strengthen the voluntary sector and unleash citizen power. Created in 1993 with bipartisan support from Congress, the president, and community groups nationwide, the corporation now engages more than a million Americans in results-driven service. Our mission is to "provide opportunities for Americans of all ages and backgrounds to engage in service that addresses the nation's educational, public safety, environmental, and other human needs to achieve direct and demonstrable results and to encourage all Americans to engage in such service" (U.S. Congress, 1993).

Taken together, the corporation's programs constitute an extensive structure that can help intergenerational approaches expand and flourish. To generate citizen service on the scale needed, the corporation and its programs are designed as a catalyst for unleashing action from corporations, foundations, and community groups.

By its very design, such service is intergenerational. Service provides an avenue for people of all ages to contribute, strengthens ties among diverse individuals and groups, and expands individual definitions of citizenship and responsibility. Reciprocity, a central tenant of intergenerational activities, is present and reinforced in national service programs across the country. People of all ages are potential givers and receivers of service. In the majority of cases, there is a direct reciprocal exchange among the primary constituencies, such as young people providing companionship and doing chores for older adults, while at the same time discovering the benefits of learning from their elders.

Older people in the Foster Grandparents program, for example, tutor children in reading, comfort hospitalized children, help adolescent mothers learn parenting skills, and encourage incarcerated young offenders to get their lives back on track. In return, Foster Grandparents report that they receive as much as they give, in the form of new purposes in later life, new skills, and new opportunities to contribute to the wellbeing of individual children and young people.

A less well-known but promising intergenerational model encourages young and old participants to serve side by side to address unmet needs in their communities. For example, participants may join forces to prepare meals in a homeless shelter, adopt and clean up a riverbed, or coordinate a book drive for early readers in poorly funded schools. Service becomes both a vehicle and a catalyst to establish and strengthen relationships among those involved and helps to export the benefits to a wider societal context. A notable new example is the plan of Big Brothers/Big Sisters to ask all "bigs" and "littles" to work together in community service projects, as part of being Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

Intergenerational programs have an important side benefit beyond the tangible work they get done. Experts and ordinary citizens have become increasingly concerned about the decline in our social fabric. In June 1998, Sam Nunn and Bill Bennett released a report from the National Commission on Civic Renewal that calls America a "nation of spectators" and points to a withering of civic life and a diminishing of citizens' involvement in their communities. The report calls for government, businesses, unions, voluntary associations, media, and foundations to work together to solve problems. Service programs--particularly intergenerational efforts--are a key part of the answer. By connecting the young and old, intergenerational programs can strengthen the building blocks of civil society and revive the civic spirit in America.

#### **EXAMPLES OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE NATIONAL SERVICE NETWORK**

A diverse range of intergenerational projects and activities are supported by the Corporation for National Service, as the examples below illustrate.

**Foster Grandparents.** The Foster Grandparent program, established in 1965, matches lower-income older adults with children with special or exceptional needs. Hundreds of thousands of children have benefited from the caring attention of Foster Grandparents. Today that program supports more than 25,000 volunteers helping about 80,000 children every year (see Table I).

**RSVP.** The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), established in 1971, extended service opportunities to all older people without regard to income. Today some 450,000 RSVP volunteers are serving in more than 70,000 sites--tutoring children, building homes, patrolling streets, and delivering meals to the homebound. Last year, approximately 27,000 RSVP volunteers provided more than 3 million hours of service to children through a variety of intergenerational activities and in numerous settings (see Table 2). (Corporation for National Service, 1997).

**Seniors for Schools.** Last year, the corporation launched Seniors for Schools, a new intergenerational program designed to help meet a critical national goal: to ensure that every American child can read by the end of the third grade. Forty percent of America's fourth graders are below the basic level in reading skills. To remedy this situation, President Bill Clinton launched the America Reads challenge in 1996, calling for a "citizen army" of volunteer tutors for locally run in-school or after-school literacy programs to help the millions of children who have fallen far behind on their reading skills. Volunteers in the corporation's Seniors for Schools program give one-on-one attention to first and second graders who need extra help in reading. Though this initiative--starting in nine states--is only a year old, teachers are already seeing gains in student reading skills. (Corporation for National Service, 1998).

**The RSVP Intergenerational Alliance.** In 1993, the corporation selected thirteen of its local RSVP sites to participate in a three-year national demonstration called the Intergenerational Alliance. The goals of the Intergenerational Alliance were (1) to develop specific project components that linked RSVP volunteers, ages 55 and older, with

children and youth in ongoing activities; (2) to engage young and old participants as teams working in intergenerational community service; and (3) to establish new intergenerational structures in their communities.

The legacy of this investment continues today in a number of communities served through the alliance. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for example, the Capital Region RSVP started the Summer Horizons program, which works with middle-school children at risk for school failure. Summer Horizons links approximately thirty-five to forty children with twenty-five RSVP volunteers to participate in a five-week summer enrichment and community service program. The intergenerational teams learn about and document local history, explore science and technology, and develop teaching and learning materials for elementary school children. Utilizing the Summer Horizons partners as its base, RSVP of the Capital Region also took the lead in forming Generations United of Central Pennsylvania, a new intergenerational network. Building on its intergenerational contacts, RSVP also helped to form and administer the Mentoring Association of Dauphin County, which serves as a technical assistance resource and clearinghouse.

AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps, the domestic Peace Corps, engages 40,000 people of all ages in intensive, results-driven service each year. After completing their service, members receive an education award to help pay for college or pay back student loans. While most AmeriCorps programs focus on the problems of children and youth, a large number reach across the generations to meet the needs of older citizens. For example, Carelink AmeriCorps members provide home-based healthcare services to 200 frail elderly and disabled adults in rural west Georgia. Members help maintain or improve their clients' physical health and reduce the number of days they spend in the hospital. Client surveys indicate that 95 percent of service recipients experienced improvement in their quality of life during the year, and days of hospitalization and emergency room visits were cut in half. Based on average hospitalization costs, AmeriCorps members' service helped generate a savings of \$370,000.

Learn and Serve America. As in AmeriCorps, a large number of student service projects involve connections between young and older Americans. The corporation's Learn and Serve America provides grants to help teachers integrate community service into the curriculum, a teaching method known as service learning. Many of these programs bring young and old together. For example, students at the Golf Middle School in Morton Grove, Illinois, volunteer one afternoon a week to teach basic computer skills to novices two generations older. The older people are not the only ones learning. In setting up the program, the middle school students helped design the curriculum, create information packets, calculate the grant's finances, and shop for supplies. Through Learn and Serve's higher education program, Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning has created Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders). Last year, more than 270 college students helped 1,023 elderly immigrants and refugees in four cities learn English and prepare for the U.S. citizenship exam.

## **BUILDING AND PROMOTING INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE**

Beyond its primary role of supporting local service programs, the corporation promotes intergenerational service in a variety of supporting roles, including the following:

- **Convenor.** Tapping its nationwide network, the corporation plays an active role in efforts such as the America Reads Challenge and the campaign for America's Promise, launched at the 1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future.
- **Experiment.** The corporation has created new service programs that involve people of all ages; has expanded the roles of older volunteers, for example, by making them service-learning coordinators; has sponsored national demonstration programs with intergenerational themes, incorporating lessons learned into new models of service.
- **Catalyst.** The corporation has forged links that bring together the nonprofit, for-profit, and public sectors in new models of local project sponsorship and has developed national initiatives that help to unite diverse groups serving constituencies across the age range.
- **Disseminator.** The corporation has developed and published guiding principles, has reported effective practices, and has supported evaluation studies that capture the successes and challenges of service programs. For example, in the mid 1990s, the corporation funded Generations United to develop two products: a technical assistance manual focused on young and old serving together, and a report on outcomes and effective practice principles to help RSVP projects develop intergenerational projects and partnerships. (Scannell and Roberts, 1994; Roberts, 1996).

## **A NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION: THE PRESIDENTS' SUMMIT FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE**

Mobilizing elders and other volunteers to help millions of at-risk children was a key idea behind the Presidents' Summit for America's Future. With the leadership of President Clinton, former presidents Bush, Carter, and Ford, Nancy Reagan representing Ronald Reagan, General Colin Powell, thirty-seven governors and leaders from business, government, education, and the nonprofit sector, the summit called on all sectors of society to help mm the tide for millions of children heading for disaster.

The campaign launched at the summit-America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth, led by General Powell-- aims to assure that all young Americans have five fundamental resources needed for success: caring adults in their lives, as parents, mentors, tutors, coaches; safe places with structured activities in which to learn and grow; a healthy start and a healthy future; an effective education that equips them with marketable skills; and an opportunity to give back to their communities through their own service.

By linking young and old, intergenerational programs have a strong track record in providing these fundamental resources. If brought to scale--to the large scale needed--they could be a key part of meeting the summit's goals.

Take the goal of providing every child an effective education. Schools and teachers across America are under enormous pressure to provide services to growing numbers of children. Class sizes are increasing. Yet resources for education-financial and otherwise--are often stagnant. Schools and teachers need help. Older volunteers are an enormous untapped source for that help. The Seniors for Schools initiative is just one of many intergenerational programs bringing seniors into America's classrooms.

Older people are increasingly in demand to serve as mentors for children who lack a caring adult in their lives. Armed with a lifetime of experience, older people are ideally suited to mentoring, which requires a consistent, long-term relationship in order to succeed. Once established, these relationships have a powerful impact. Research shows that young people with mentors do better in school and are less likely to use drugs or alcohol (Freedman, 1994; Henkin, Perez-Randal, and Rogers, 1993).

By serving as tutors and mentors, older people make an important contribution to educating children and youth. But perhaps just as powerful as serving youth is asking and enabling young people themselves to serve.

Engaging people in service at an early age is a tried and tested way of instilling important civic values. It can also increase academic performance, especially when linked to classroom instruction through service learning. Intergenerational programs can play a key role in expanding service learning, by building on partnerships between schools and communities, training teachers, and helping community groups develop good service opportunities for the students.

## **TAPPING THE TALENT OF OLDER AMERICANS**

The number of people in the United States over age 65 has doubled since 1960 and will double again in the next thirty years. In just this century, twenty-eight years have been added to the length of an average person's life. Not only are Americans living longer, they are retiring earlier than ever before. The net result is that millions of Americans can now expect to spend up to one-third of their lives beyond retirement, with many of those years in good health.

Far too often, people see this demographic revolution with concern, even fear--viewing older people as a liability, a burden on our economy and healthcare system. The aging of America presents challenges, but more important, it provides a great opportunity--to engage the best-educated and most vigorous group of elders in our history in helping to solve society's problems.

How is it possible to engage more older Americans in a large-scale campaign of action to help America's youth? The aging revolution taking place in America provides a great opportunity. We cannot, however, assume that more will

serve because of demographic changes alone. It is necessary to make it happen by strengthening programs, expanding capacity, and building new partnerships.

As a first step, we need to do better to understand older people and what motivates them to volunteer, especially the baby boomers. More research is needed to do the following:

- Adapt service and volunteer concepts and appropriately respond to the next generation of participants, particularly by providing high-quality opportunities.
- Channel and direct the tremendous social and human resource that older volunteers represent to meeting critical social needs.
- Provide insight and discover effective practices on how to recruit a more diverse group of older volunteers.
- Increasingly ensure that intergenerational service programs achieve important results.

The number-one reason that people volunteer is, they are asked. The challenge is to ask more and do it more widely and effectively-and to have more good assignments for those who answer the call. Recruitment strategies must be targeted to the underrepresented segments of the older adult population, including men and retired professionals.

Most important, it is essential to ensure that programs are high quality and effective. To do this, reform of Senior Corps programs of the Corporation for National Service is under way, designed to improve efficiency by increasing opportunities for outcome-oriented service. More than ever before, our programs are meeting serious needs, demonstrating clear results, and providing serious challenges to a new generation of participants.

## CONCLUSION

The three decades of investment in a network of national service programs have yielded an infrastructure that can serve as a building block in large-scale expansion. This infrastructure is well established and capable of responding to new challenges. It is a small investment that results in a large return. Government cannot do it alone. The independent and corporate sectors must be active partners. This network is not the answer, but it can be an important catalyst in tapping the power of older people.

Two simultaneous changes--the aging of the population and the growing numbers of children at risk--create a compelling need for increased intergenerational programs and activities, including the promotion of service by young people as well as for them.

William James (1906), writing about universal service, said, "It is only a question of blowing on the spark until the whole population gets incandescent" The intergenerational field has lit a spark. Let's ignite that spark and make incandescent the idea of senior service to help fulfill the promise of America for all America's children.

### Table 1 Highlights of Foster Grandparent Service to Children with Special Needs, 1997

Legend for Chart:

A - SPECIAL NEED

B - NUMBER OF FOSTER GRANDPARENTS

C - NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED

A	B	C
Abused/neglected children	3,100	20,300
Children with physical or development disabilities	5,600	18,700
Children with learning disabilities	6,700	38,100

Children with emotional impairments,  
including autism 2,700 15,900

**Table 2 Highlights of RSVP Volunteer Service to Children and Youth, 1997**

Legend for Chart:

- A - TYPE OF SERVICES
- B - NUMBER OF RSVP VOLUNTEERS
- C - NUMBER OF HOURS SERVED

A	B	C
Child health, including maternal and child health and serving boarder babies and teen pregnancy	3,530	590,217
Education, including preelementary and daycare, elementary education, secondary education, special education, tutoring, and Head Start	21,082	2,362,945
Mentoring	2,300	388,748

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By Harris Wofford

Harris Wofford is chief executive officer, Corporation for National Service, Washington, D. C.

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