

# Myth & Realities Of Older Volunteers

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*“With my resources, And your resources, Everyone will benefit.”---Maori Proverb*

With the impending Age Wave upon us and the nation at battle over health care reform, many see the elderly as a burden to society. As you probably know, the fifty plus older segment of the population will more than double over the next thirty-five years. The average life expectancy has increased significantly in the last century. People turning fifty today have half their adult lives ahead of them. And in 2011, the oldest of the boomers will turn sixty-five and become Social Security and Medicare beneficiaries. All this is causing policy makers and others to contemplate how the coming flood of aging boomers will affect our society.

However, let's not lose sight of what we are gaining with this increasing elderly population. Older Americans don't simply drain the nation's resources, they contribute to them as workers, consumers, volunteers, mentors and caregivers. Of the 61.8 million people who volunteered between September 2007-2008, nearly a quarter of them were over the age of sixty-five. Of that twenty-five percent almost half (46.1%) volunteered 100 hours or more that year. That's a significant contribution. In Culpeper County, according to the Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services Board and Area Agency on Aging's RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program), seniors make up the largest group of volunteers in our region.

With all these older adults volunteering in our community, it's time we recognize their contributions and dispel the myths that are associated with them. Some organizations fear that senior citizens require more training because they lack technology skills and are slow learning new skills. Studies have shown that while older adults sometimes do take longer to absorb completely new material, their better study habits and accumulated experience actually lower training costs. In addition, those 50 and over are the fastest growing group of Internet users. I volunteer weekly with the Tech Time for Seniors Program at St. Luke's Lutheran school, a program that teaches basic computer skills for seniors. Every time I attend a class, it never fails that an older person I'm helping teaches me something about the computer that I didn't know. They love learning and ask questions that I never thought to inquire myself. They are constantly challenging and

improving my knowledge of the computer. They are worth the investment of the time it takes to train them.

The Baby Boomer volunteers are entirely different than any other group and will require organizations to reinvent the way they use volunteers and the opportunities they offer. The Boomer volunteers are more reluctant to commit to a scheduled, weekly block of time. They are looking for flexibility, special projects of limited duration, and short-term commitments. Organizations may need to offer options for flexible shifts, possibilities for both short term and long term time commitments and opportunities for family and couple volunteering. Those that do will reap the benefits of the Boomer's acquired skills, knowledge and experience. They can use their talents coordinating fundraisers, organizing events, marketing, networking, creating websites and newsletters, the list is endless.

Kellie Doyle, Executive Director of the Windmore Foundation, says her recent recruitment of a senior volunteer required minimal training. "She was a retired Executive Secretary for the Federal Government and came in with the skill sets already in place. She was able to jump right in and assist in our membership drive—making changes to our database, making phone calls—there was no training needed. She came in seamlessly." When asked if Windmore has had any issues with older volunteers or if they have had to make any adjustments to accommodate seniors, Doyle replied "Creativity doesn't have an age. Every volunteer has their own limitations and requirements, it doesn't just apply to senior citizens."

So let's embrace this gift of talent that is coming to us and use it to improve our community. If you are an organization that uses volunteers, open your doors to the older population and utilize their experience to better your mission. If you are a senior yourself, get involved and share your skills with others. Together we can make Culpeper a healthy place to grow and age!

*The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is America's largest volunteer network for people age 55 and over. If your organization needs volunteers, or if you are an older adult looking to volunteer, please contact Lola Walker at 540-825-3100 and get connected today! Aging Together is a community partnership that works to improve the lives of senior citizens and their caregivers in our region. To learn more, visit us at [www.agingtogether.org](http://www.agingtogether.org).*