Experienced Helping Hands

Why older volunteers can be your best resource and how to engage them
Our demographic landscape is changing. By 2050, the number of adults over 65 in the U.S. will double to over 80 million. This growing population is likely to experience isolation: today, a third of adults over 65 and half over 85 live alone, contributing to higher rates of loneliness and linked to depression, cognitive decline and other major health problems. But studies have shown that when an older adult has a positive self-perception of aging, he or she lives 7.5 years longer on average.

At the same time, 21% of U.S. children live in poverty, and another 22% are just barely above the poverty line. California alone has 2 million children living in poverty, including 30% of both black and Hispanic children. Decades ago, there was a 31% difference between affluent and poor Americans earning bachelor’s degrees, but that gap has since widened to 45%.

But with their lifetime of experience and skills, older adults can help give disadvantaged children, youth, and young adults the tools to help them succeed. Retired adults have the time to give back and collectively account for almost half the volunteer hours in the U.S. And as they engage with their communities, they’re highly likely to experience improvements in mood, stress levels and overall health. Additionally, children with a caring adult in their lives perform better in school, which increases their lifetime income and reduces their dependence on the social safety net.

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Nonprofits can capitalize on this mutual benefit by seeking out more senior volunteers. While reaping the benefits of their life experience, organizations often also find senior volunteers valuable for their reliability. In fact, many organizations report that their older volunteers are their best. We recently surveyed our network of nonprofit leaders, and found that organizations with a high percentage of older volunteers reported retaining volunteers longer. In fact, 43% of organizations where at least half of their volunteers were over 50 reported retaining volunteers for more than five years on average.

In addition, management is key to retaining a strong pool of volunteers. In our survey, organizations with a dedicated volunteer coordinator on staff saw the strongest retention rates. And, those that regularly assessed volunteer satisfaction and directly expressed appreciation for their volunteers saw higher retention than organizations that didn’t. For organizations where volunteers stayed five years or longer, 71% of those nonprofits regularly assessed volunteer satisfaction, called or wrote to express appreciation, and held volunteer appreciation events. Of organizations where volunteers stayed six months or less, no organization did all three, and 83% took only one or none of those actions.

As our society ages, there will be more and more seniors seeking the right opportunity to give back. Here’s how you can recruit, manage and retain volunteers from this valuable and growing population.
Seniors are looking for worthy causes to apply a lifetime of skills and experience. Retired educators often seek out opportunities to work with children, while retired doctors can enjoy volunteering at community clinics. Want to attract new senior volunteers to your cause? Here’s where to start:

**Look to your existing volunteers!** Let them know you need more help, and ask if anyone in their network would be a good fit for your organization. Word-of-mouth is a powerful recruitment tool.

**Think of the professions with the skills you need.** Reach out to local professional networks to establish your organization with potential volunteers. Unions and large companies often have email or print newsletters that could include your call for volunteers.

**Go where the seniors are.** Senior centers, faith communities, alumni groups, and culturally-specific organizations can connect you to individuals or help coordinate volunteer groups.

**Go where the volunteers are.** Programs like Encore.org’s Generation to Generation, Americorps, and Senior Corps can match your organization with volunteers.

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School on Wheels matches homeless children with tutors across Los Angeles, and relies heavily on consistent volunteers. When Executive Director Catherine Meek saw that their retention rates were significantly higher for older volunteers, she crafted a new strategy to increase their number of senior tutors. “We know that the longer a volunteer stays with a student, the better it is for both parties,” she said. “We have always used senior tutors in our work but never really targeted them as a group.” When they began targeting senior centers and partnered with Senior Corps and Americorps, they increased the number of students matched with senior volunteers by 20%. With the increase in reliable volunteers, School on Wheels was able to provide more children with the consistency they need to succeed.
Community

Once volunteers have come through your doors, how do you keep them? One of the most-cited reasons volunteers return is the connections and friendships they make. And while it's no secret that volunteers who feel appreciated are more likely to return, fostering connections can lead to increased job satisfaction for staff members and stronger outcomes from those you serve. Here are some ideas to foster community among volunteers at your organization:

Get to know them! As with donors, volunteers should be cultivated. Even if you’re not directly involved with managing volunteers, introduce yourself to the regulars and learn their story. This is also a great way for non-program staff to feel more directly connected to your organization’s mission by seeing it through a volunteer’s eyes.

Create opportunities for volunteers to get to know each other. Leave room for downtime during event volunteer shifts, and have them work in pairs or groups. Volunteers are more likely to return if they’re working among friends.

Hold an annual thank-you event. These don’t have to get pricey—host a potluck and ask volunteers to share one of their favorite recipes, which also can spark conversation.

At CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocates), volunteers step into the overstretched foster care system to advocate for children. Many are retired and enjoy connecting with the children as well as their fellow volunteers. Luisa Latham is a retired educator whose CASA case involves three brothers. In addition to seeing the children regularly and making sure their needs are being met, Latham also regularly speaks with other CASAs who are working on similar or connected cases. "I’m in a CASA book group," she said. "We read things and talk about how they’re pertinent to the cases we’re working on. It’s a good chance to talk to people who have been doing this longer than I have and learn about new approaches." This interdependence creates an even stronger sense of purpose in the volunteers.
Comfort

Older volunteers are often the most dedicated, but can also require a little extra consideration to make sure they’re comfortable as they work. Be conscious of mobility, vision, and hearing challenges so they can be as empowered and effective as possible. These tips can help make older volunteers more comfortable:

Pay attention to their workspace. Be proactive and place them in a well-lit, quieter area that doesn’t require stairs whenever possible.

Take advantage of their availability during the day when younger volunteers are at work or school. When you need them in the evening, see if there are other volunteers willing to carpool if they have challenges driving at night—an added community-building bonus! In addition, make sure there are adequate parking spots (handicapped and regular) or a convenient drop-off location nearby.

Set a reminder to regularly call those without internet access or who may not be comfortable online.

Bonus! Go above and beyond: Some organizations provide travel stipends to volunteers on fixed incomes. A little gas money or bus fare can be just enough to keep a great volunteer.

826LA pairs children with tutors to develop writing skills and improve academic outcomes. With 20% of their volunteer force over 50 years old, this demographic has been invaluable to the organization. 826LA has been able to keep them coming back by taking paying attention to the specific needs of older volunteers. Lauren Humphrey, 826LA’s Volunteer Manager, has made an effort to make older volunteers comfortable after seeing some of them struggle with noise or dimly-lit areas. “If we have an older volunteer coming in, we’ll seat them in the front so it’s easier for them to see and hear,” she said. These spots are better-lit so volunteers can easily focus on the children. She’s also learned to capitalize on their schedules. “Often older volunteers also won’t drive after a certain time. But fortunately having activities all day, we can accommodate them and adjust their schedules as needed—we can pivot them into other programs to keep them.” While many volunteers aren’t able to come during the day, older volunteers can fill that gap.
Your Action Plan

**Capitalize On Your Cause:**
- Recruit through existing volunteers.
- Create relationships with networks of professionals.
- Collaborate with local and national organizations.

**Foster Community:**
- Encourage staff to get to know volunteers.
- Create opportunities for volunteers to form friendships.
- Hold social thank-you events.

**Create Comfort:**
- Be aware of mobility, vision, and hearing challenges.
- Schedule older volunteers during the day or encourage carpools.
- Regularly call those without internet access.

Additional Resources at eisnerfoundation.org/resources