

Will Baby Boomers Volunteer?

There is growing interest in the potential of the Baby Boomers—through civic engagement and volunteering—to become part of the solution to the many challenges for society that are generated by their increasing numbers (Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh & Culp, 2008). Baby Boomers are redefining the expectations of old age and evolving new roles. Many are pursuing new careers, starting businesses or entering politics at a time of life when their predecessors were contemplating retirement to the porch. An emerging “new-age-old-age” is transforming elders' lives. In *Breaking the Watch*, a beautifully written book on retirees living in an upstate New York community, Joel Savishinsky (2000) eloquently provides examples of the increasing number of older people who actually follow through on pre-retirement aspirations; to take up t'ai chi, travel, become a painter, or write a memoir.

But as Baby Boomers pursue aspirations for personal growth and fulfillment, will we see an increase in volunteerism? Can we look forward to a generation of altruistic elders devoting time and energy to supporting their peers who are disabled, fall sick or become economically or socially vulnerable? Or will this generation simply become self absorbed? Will the Baby Boomers become a resource or a liability for the Commonwealth?

Data from the 2007 KERI survey provide grounds for optimism. Over one-third (37.2%) of the 2,886 Baby Boomers responding to a question on community involvement, anticipate that their engagement in community activities will increase. Younger Baby Boomers (born between 1956 and 1964) are more likely than older Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1955) to express this view (42.5% versus 32.9%). Reinforcing these findings, 45.5% of Baby Boomer respondents (50.7% of the younger cohort and 41.4% of the older cohort), expect to spend “more time” volunteering in ten years.

Findings from the KERI survey are consistent with a groundswell of activity on the national level that is moving society toward increased engagement of older people. Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act in 2005 provided new authority for the Administration on Aging to develop and implement programs that promote civic engagement. The National Council on Aging and the Gerontological Society of America has also embraced civic engagement as a priority.

As we move toward recognizing aging Baby Boomers as an untapped resource, it is important to remain mindful of the danger of engagement slipping into exploitation. It is all very well to encourage increased volunteerism among older adults. But it is critical to acknowledge that many elders, especially in Kentucky, simply do not have the time or resources to be so magnanimous. To invidiously creep toward widespread expectation that older adults, without remuneration or cost to the state, will provide large amounts of unpaid care to their peers as they become frail is unconscionable.

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References: (1) Kaskie, B., Imhof, S., Cavanaugh, J. & Culp, K. (2008). Civic engagement as a retirement role for aging Americans. *The Gerontologist*, 48:3, 368-377; (2) Savishinsky, J. (2000). *Breaking the Watch: The Meanings of Retirement in America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.