

IMMIGRANT ELDERS LEADING CHANGE FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES



In 2006, as the first of the baby boomers began turning 60, much of the national conversation was about predicted crises in Social Security, Medicare, and services for retired individuals. California Community Foundation, however, saw an opportunity. As a champion of community-driven problem solving in Los Angeles County since 1915, the Foundation engages residents as leaders and supports them in developing solutions that improve their communities. In the coming wave of older adults, the Foundation recognized a vast pool of talent, experience, and energy.

The older population of L.A. is already so large that the city and county each have a Department of Aging. Nearly a quarter of L.A. County residents—more than 2.2 million people—are over age 55. What would it take to empower this resource? What would be possible if we applied older adults' knowledge and skills, tapped into their motivations, lifted up their ideas, and channeled their energies into action?

The Foundation joined the Community Experience Partnership, a national initiative of The Atlantic Philanthropies dedicated to mobilizing older adults to create change that strengthens communities, and quickly brought a unique lens to the work. L.A. is home to one of the largest urban and suburban concentrations of immigrants in the nation—nearly one in three people. The county's immigrant communities face special challenges, but also include a substantial proportion of the boomer-aged population. In many immigrant communities, elders hold a unique position of influence and respect. "The conversation around baby boomer engagement often centers on mainstream, well-to-do professionals," notes Gabriele Burkard, who served as the program officer at California Community Foundation during the project. "A large part of the population in L.A. doesn't fit that, but they have a lot to offer."

The Foundation set out to demonstrate the benefits of mobilizing low-income, immigrant older adults to tackle community issues by creating a new multi-year effort, which they called Engaging Immigrant Boomers for L.A.'s Future. Their goal was to build a model that would deliver real benefits to the community and be viable across immigrant communities of diverse national backgrounds, life experience, and educational attainment. Ultimately, the Foundation showed that engaging experienced adults is a powerful strategy for addressing a wide range of common challenges in immigrant communities, including lack of access to services, social isolation, marginalization, obesity and chronic disease, and illiteracy.

AT-A-GLANCE

ENGAGING IMMIGRANT BOOMERS FOR L.A.'S FUTURE INITIATIVE

COMMUNITY ISSUE

Addressing the needs of immigrant communities

COLLABORATORS

California Community Foundation
Centro Latino for Literacy
Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles
Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Los Angeles County, California
Total population = 10 million
55+ population = 2.2 million (22%)

RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

119 low-income, immigrant older adult volunteers trained to be community leaders
5,907 contributed hours valued at \$146,198
221 outreach events or activities conducted, reaching 138,773 residents

Increased engagement of low-income older adults, leading to stronger communities, greater community capacity to respond to needs, and greater access to and use of available services

Replicable training model for engaging older adult immigrants to address different community needs

Three Communities, Three Opportunities to Create Change

The large immigrant population in L.A. County is diverse and geographically dispersed. Any effort to engage immigrant communities has to be anchored with local nonprofits that have existing on-the-ground relationships. “In order for an organization to work effectively within a particular ethnic community,” Burkard says, “it has to be in and of that community, and it has to be viewed by the residents as a trusted partner. It can’t be an outsider.”

To find and choose appropriate partners, the Foundation issued a request for information to explore the missions, goals, and strategies of nonprofit organizations, and to learn about their prior experience working with older adults and older adult immigrants. More than 120 agencies submitted inquiries, demonstrating a broad level of interest in the strategy of engaging older adults. Planners invited a subset of those respondents to submit proposals with more detail about target populations, assets, and challenges that would shape their projects.

The Foundation ultimately selected three organizations: one that worked with Latinos to develop Spanish literacy and English language skills, one that provided a range of social services to the Farsi-speaking (Iranian) community, and one that promoted healthy eating among Filipino and Latino populations. By selecting three partners, each working with different immigrant groups, the project set out to test multiple approaches and to show how this work could be done with diverse populations.

Each partner received a \$10,000 planning grant and was asked to draw on their knowledge and experience to address their community issue and shape their project. They validated and refined their plans through direct research with older adults in their communities, which proved to be an element critical to their work. The organizations conducted numerous interviews and focus groups with older adults to understand more about what they saw as priority needs, and which issues they were most passionate about working on. Two of the three organizations began with specific focus areas—literacy and nutrition—and validated them before moving forward, understanding more about the specific ways older adults wanted to work on those issues. The other organization ended up significantly refocusing their plan to better align with the interests of older adults. Their original idea, centered around adult day services for the elderly, was significantly reframed: Their boomer-aged population was most interested in increasing awareness about resources to address domestic violence, mental health, and other issues that older adults said were urgent, yet hidden from view, within their community.

The Foundation provided extensive technical assistance and resources to support the partners as they developed theories of change, built program logic models, and created concrete project work plans. “We really did approach this as a partnership between the Foundation and these community agencies, and between the agencies and their communities,” Burkard observes. “I served as a sounding board on how to deal with challenges that came along, but [the agencies] really were in charge of how to do this whole project.”

In the end, Engaging Immigrant Boomers for L.A.’s Future committed to three projects, each lasting three years:

- In the Pico-Union area of metro L.A., Centro Latino for Literacy recruited and trained Latino older adult *promotores*—community advocates—to lead an outreach and advocacy effort that brought much-needed Spanish literacy programs to more community sites. Promotores connected residents with resources and served as classroom mentors, assisting students who were studying to become literate in Spanish as a precursor to learning English. Many of the promotores were newly literate or still in the process of learning to read and write.
- In the San Fernando Valley, Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles trained, placed, and supported Iranian immigrants in paraprofessional volunteer roles within a network of service providers. The project built providers’ competence in working with Iranians as both service recipients and paraprofessional volunteers. They also conducted a consumer education campaign in local Iranian media to break down cultural barriers against seeking help for issues such as domestic violence.
- In Historic Filipinotown, the Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California trained and placed Filipino and Latino older adult volunteers in leadership, community outreach, education, and advocacy roles related to healthy eating. Volunteers were educated in the basics of nutrition and, with the help of dietitians, learned how to adapt favorite cultural recipes to be as healthy as possible.



The Unique Potential Older Adults Bring to Community Improvement Work

Older adults often are uniquely positioned to create impact because they:

- are committed to helping the communities in which they’ve spent much of their lives
- are more mature and have deeper understanding of community needs and resources
- have tremendous influence over their grandchildren’s education and upbringing
- are respected champions in the community for organizations or ideas
- serve as role models and inspire family and friends to become civically engaged, leading by example

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—Gabriele Burkard, California Community Foundation (formerly)

Older Adults Making a Difference

With an active and engaged volunteer corps serving as community leaders and advocates, the three nonprofit organizations that participated in Engaging Immigrant Boomers for L.A.’s Future increased their capacity to fulfill their missions and address urgent needs in the communities they serve. Today, older adults are stepping up as leaders and problem-solvers, and through their actions are inspiring peers and family members to become engaged, resulting in stronger neighborhoods.

At Centro Latino for Literacy, staff realized in a deeper way that people they had been serving could also be of service. “Older adults were invisible to them,” Burkard remembers, “even though they had older adults there, learning how to read and write in Spanish. Their participation in the project opened up a whole new world of people to serve—and people as resources.” The agency established a network of 18 literacy partners in the Westlake-Pico Union area to offer their Spanish literacy training program, Leamos™. Older adult volunteers organized and participated in dozens of events, including health fairs, back to school nights, parents meetings, and free summer concerts at local parks. Seven older adults volunteers also served as teacher assistants or classroom mentors.

The work that Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles does in the Iranian community has also been transformed. They built a network of host agencies for volunteer placement—20 diverse providers including a hospital, a food bank, a mentoring organization, and a parenting support group. The project’s older adult volunteers served as senior companions, health ambassadors, residential fruit pickers, art instructors, and mentors, and helped increase the cultural competence of L.A.’s social service agencies that work with Iranian immigrants. By the end of the project, the number of calls to the Iranian Peer Helpline had tripled, ensuring that many more members of the community were getting connected with available supports. Building on the experience of this project, Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles has since won a \$2 million contract from the County to provide mental health services to the Farsi-speaking population.

Pilipino Workers Center of Southern California created two volunteer training programs on leadership and healthy nutrition—one each for Filipino and Latino boomer volunteers. Their older adult participants organized 92 diverse events that promoted healthy dietary practices, including a healthy cooking contest, a nutrition-focused community asset mapping activity, and a town hall meeting on nutrition. They also developed a multi-generational community education campaign, planned by a committee made up of youths and older adults, and produced multimedia materials and tools including a website, educational videos, cooking demo videos, and a comic book. “The way they operated was as a partner with their community, as opposed to delivering service to old people,” Burkard notes. The focus on older adults turned out to be a great way to achieve even wider participation. “They actually engaged community across all ages.”

Lessons Learned

The Foundation convened its three partners quarterly, creating a peer learning community where organizations could share their struggles and exchange best practices. Much of what they learned reinforces widely accepted best practices of all volunteer efforts: Success is more likely when volunteers have been properly trained, are matched with their interests, and are offered flexibility in scheduling. A volunteer manager to coordinate training and placement is essential. The expectations held by volunteers—and by the programs they are supporting—must be clearly defined for everyone, especially in terms of roles and time commitments.

Engaging Immigrant Boomers for L.A.’s Future did surface additional considerations for programs targeting older adult immigrant volunteers. Immigrant volunteers often need more training and encouragement than other, more established baby boomer volunteers, so that they feel comfortable helping strangers. Also, organizations sometimes need to adjust the language they use. Many participants are motivated by a desire to set a good example or to honor community. For some, the notion of “volunteering” doesn’t resonate; they see themselves as helping friends and neighbors.

Also, several outside challenges and stressors potentially inhibit volunteerism in low-income, immigrant communities. Economic hardship, health problems, limited language ability, and difficulty adjusting to new cultural environments were issues that partners had to address as they developed their outreach efforts, trainings, and ongoing supports.

Ultimately, though, the investment to nurture older adult immigrant leadership has paid off in Los Angeles. With an active and engaged volunteer corps serving as community leaders and advocates, the Foundation and its nonprofit collaborators have new resources with which to fulfill their missions. The strategy has been successfully adapted to a range of settings and organizations—from a large, traditional service provider to small, grassroots organizations. Older adults have become integral to the work of these organizations and to the well-being of their communities.

Equally as important, including a broad cross-section of older adults from diverse ethnic, social, and economic circumstances is expanding the public discourse about the role of elders in our communities. Engaging Immigrant Boomers for L.A.’s Future has shown that all older adults, regardless of status, region, income, citizenship, or education, have the potential to contribute and make a difference if given tools, training, and encouragement.

Learn about experienced adults leading other types of change in diverse communities across the country, and access resources to help you do similar work in your community.

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