

ENGAGING EXPERIENCED ADULTS TO END HOMELESSNESS



Grand Rapids, Michigan, looks a lot like you might imagine Everytown, USA. With 190,000 people in a county of 600,000, it doesn't quite break into the top 100 American cities, yet it is home to major industries, small businesses, craft breweries, galleries and museums, and more than 15 higher education institutions. Often ranked as one of the country's most livable mid-sized cities, it was also recently named a top destination for visitors by the Lonely Planet travel guide. Nonetheless, like similar communities across the nation, Grand Rapids confronts serious issues, including a countywide homeless population estimated to be greater than 6,000.

In 2004, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation joined dozens of other community groups, government agencies, churches, and individuals in making a commitment to end homelessness within ten years. Beyond making a financial commitment—more than \$3.5 million dedicated to homelessness-related projects over the subsequent decade—the Foundation wanted to help mobilize area residents to be a part of the solution. The community already had a reputation for being charitable and volunteering at high levels, but the Foundation suspected one group in particular had talents and skills that were underutilized: experienced adults. Anecdotally and through surveys, the Foundation confirmed what they had suspected—Grand Rapids adults in their 50s and 60s had knowledge and experience that many of the community-based organizations working on homelessness desperately needed.

The Foundation convened a planning team with two dozen members from a variety of community organizations, including nonprofits, higher education institutions, and government; more than half of the participants were over age 50. During a four-month period, the group researched the barriers to and motivations for effective engagement of experienced adults, and began exploring strategies for mobilizing this unique resource as part of the campaign to end homelessness. In the end, they launched Experienced Adults Ending Homelessness, a three-year project helping more than three dozen nonprofit agencies learn how to access, support, and benefit from experienced adults as a resource.

AT-A-GLANCE

EXPERIENCED ADULTS ENDING HOMELESSNESS

COMMUNITY ISSUE

Ending homelessness

COLLABORATORS

Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Seven agencies providing housing-related services: Habitat for Humanity of Kent County, Well House, Disability Advocates of Kent County, Degage Ministries, Congregational Partnership Program, Healthy Homes, and the Salvation Army Booth Family Services

The Volunteer Center of Heart of West Michigan
United Way

Grand Valley State University's Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership

Roofs to Roots (the local coalition to end homelessness)

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Total population = 190,000

55+ population = 39,500 (21%)

RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

Demonstration projects in seven agencies showcasing Encore opportunities

A clearinghouse connecting experienced adults with skill-based opportunities

A learning community helping 39 nonprofit organizations leverage experienced adults

Experienced adult role models participating at all partner agencies

Six of seven agencies providing financial incentives to experienced adult participants (stipends, paid positions)

Today, the organizations have defined meaningful roles for experienced adult recruits ranging from marketing, website development, and data management to construction-site leadership, energy conservation, facility management, and advocacy. Powered by this influx of talent and experience, nonprofits are increasing access to affordable housing, bolstering support for individuals and families at risk of homelessness, and building the capacity to rapidly re-house people who become homeless.

Shifting How Nonprofits Work with Experienced Adults

“When people arrive in their 50s and 60s, they start to think about, ‘What’s next?’,” says Grand Rapids Community Foundation Program Director Kate Luckert Schmid. “They’ve accomplished some things, mastered some skills, seen a lot—they’re better at connecting the dots, seeing the big picture, and working cooperatively.” Many people at this age feel the desire to give back and look for ways they can contribute to the common good. They offer more than simply time; many experienced adults have deep expertise, developed in lifelong careers or running households and raising families.

Yet, consistently, the volunteer and encore career opportunities that experienced adults found were missing the mark. Viewed by nonprofits as “extra hands” as opposed to “extra brains,” experienced adults were seldom being matched with jobs that suited their backgrounds and interests. They did not see that their contributions were making a difference, and they found it difficult to feel invested in the work they were being asked to do. Nonprofit organizations, meanwhile, did not have the bandwidth to figure out how to leverage experienced adults for mission-critical work. The promise of new resources was attractive, but, at least in the short term, seemed like a diversion from more pressing activities.

To shift this dynamic, Experienced Adults Ending Homelessness made major investments to help area nonprofit organizations change the way they approached working with experienced adult contributors. They made a multi-year commitment to support a wide range of activities, from developing job descriptions for the encore workforce to crafting effective marketing strategies to appeal to experienced adults. They also provided ongoing technical assistance to help organizations work with the experienced adults they recruited.

A central element of the project was the creation of an Encore Learning Community to bring organizations together for both formal and informal learning. The project hosted trainings for the implementing partners and chose topics that reflected the challenges they were facing. Topics included how to find volunteers over age 50, volunteer management, how to use social media to recruit and stay engaged with experienced adults, calculating the economic value of volunteers, and others.

The Encore Learning Community also gave collaborators time to share their work and learn from each other. While many implementing partners had worked with volunteers—including experienced adults—the learning community deepened their knowledge and taught specific skills for creating successful volunteer matches for experienced adults.

Instead of building their own support curriculum, the Encore Learning Community identified Coming of Age Learning Lab (a training component of a national initiative that promotes service, learning, and leadership among experienced adults) as a promising resource. Their initial experience demonstrated the value of this training so strongly that they began requiring it for collaborators that joined the effort later on. In addition to the Coming of Age training, participating nonprofits received ongoing support from the Volunteer Center of Heart of West Michigan United Way and the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. These “connecting” agencies offered real-time technical assistance to help the organizations create and manage meaningful placements for experienced adults.

Flexibility Is Critical

One of the pivotal changes nonprofits were asked to make was in how they matched experienced adults with jobs. The roles that participants took on looked very different across the implementing agencies, depending on the different kinds of work those organizations were doing. As importantly, the interests and needs of experienced adults were carefully considered. The “over-50 demographic” is in fact quite diverse, and a one-size-fits-all approach would have created barriers for many.

Some experienced adult participants were motivated by the opportunity to learn new skills through their work, while others wanted to have the immediate satisfaction of applying existing knowledge and skills. At Habitat for Humanity, a volunteer who brought building and repair skills created a role for himself as the “fix it” person, refurbishing household items that would have otherwise been discarded but instead were placed in new homes or resold to raise money. At the same time, other Habitat volunteers without any prior construction experience joined and eagerly learned new skills on job sites.

Others were able to leverage personal networks: As part of an identified focus to address homelessness among military veterans, Habitat wanted to host construction of a home for a veteran, built by veterans. They had few connections with the veterans’ network and had been unable to move forward with the project until they discovered that one of their experienced adult volunteers had been named Michigan Veteran of the Year. When Habitat approached him to help them reach out to the veteran community, he sprung into action. “He helped recruit volunteers, he brought us home buyer referrals, he gave speeches to veterans’ groups,” remarks one of the Habitat staff members. “He ended up working 16 hours a week and literally made that Veterans’ Build a success.”

Habitat was not the only nonprofit that succeeded because they took the time to understand and leverage the unique abilities and needs of their experienced adult recruits. At the Salvation Army, a new experienced adult participant came with experience using Salesforce software and was happily tapped to help the agency develop a much-needed database. The organization leveraged other volunteers to work in administrative support, freeing up full-time staff to focus more on client case management; administrative volunteers received training in the computer skills they needed to conduct intakes for the organization.

Implementing partners also approached compensation differently. Some partners used grant funds to provide stipends to experienced adult participants, while other placements were purely volunteer in nature. In several instances, volunteers became so indispensable to their organizations that paid positions were created. Some placements were highly structured, while others were designed to be flexible.

“What kept me [involved] is the flexibility,” explains one experienced adult participant in the work. “[Other organizations] want you there every Thursday. I’m not ready to say every Thursday I’ll go there. With [Experienced Adults Ending Homelessness] during the week, you show up and they find something for you to do.”

“A lot of times people think about their inability,” says another participant. “As a volunteer you find out about your ability, and that’s huge. I can do this. I’m doing something productive and I feel good.”

Long-Term Sustainability

The Grand Rapids Community Foundation had a long-term exit strategy in mind from the earliest days of the project. They did not intend to fund Experienced Adults Ending Homelessness indefinitely, and worked with participating nonprofits to ensure they each developed their own sustainability plans.

In practice, this effort will continue in varied ways across the partner organizations. All report that they have learned techniques for working effectively with experienced adults, and that they are enthusiastic about drawing on experienced adult skills, knowledge, and talents going forward. Many are continuing to work with existing and new experienced adult participants. Partners that provided stipends or created paid positions, however, expect to lose at least some of their participants once funding ends. Efforts to build sustainability into programs have been most successful when partner organizations do not create new positions tied directly to temporary funding, but rather use support to advance their own thinking about how to effectively recruit and engage experienced adults within their organization.

The three-year indicators of the project’s success are numerous. Today, the Grand Rapids community offers significantly more and better social purpose work opportunities for experienced adults than were available three years ago—and community-based organizations are reaping the benefits. Among opportunities posted on the Volunteer Center’s website,

the percentage that are explicitly skill-based has increased from roughly five or ten percent to 25 percent of the listings. Organizations are getting savvier about ways they can leverage this highly skilled pool of talent.

In addition, the community now has more-effective connectors linking experienced adults to volunteer opportunities. The Volunteer Center has not only become a champion of skill-based volunteering, but also significantly enhanced its online resources for matching community members with nonprofits. Through its HandsOn Connect online platform, the Center offers an inviting, user-friendly vehicle for organizations to post volunteer opportunities and for community members to find placements that match their skills and interests. The site places a strong emphasis on the skill-based opportunities that are of particular interest to experienced adults.



Why Experienced Adults?

Experienced adults often bring important intangibles—a sense of calm and steadiness—to stressful environments. “They bring life experience, warmth, caring, someone who can take the time to help in a wide variety of ways,” notes a staff member from a Grand Rapids agency that works with families in housing crises. “The experienced adult volunteers can be more like kindly grandparents to families in stress, and provide a good counter-balance to system and professional resources.”

Another agency director expresses similar sentiments: “There’s the life experience, wisdom, whatever they have done in the past, living and being successful, and maintaining housing and paying bills—life skills. Some of the people we are working with may never have had the opportunity to be successful in paying their bills or keeping up on the rent. An older, experienced person can just say, ‘Hey, what do you want to work on? Have you ever thought about doing it this way? What if you tried this? Would you like to work on this together?’”

The key is to match skills and interests with meaningful roles. “Older adults are more deliberative in making a commitment to volunteering,” says Volunteer Center Director Jane Royer. “They’re looking for a good fit with their skills—and the skills they want to learn—and are generally ready to make a longer-term commitment if the match is good.”

Beyond the initial match, nonprofits are demonstrating increased effectiveness in working to get the most from their experienced adult contributors. Fifty-five local organizations have benefited from the Coming of Age training. Significantly, more nonprofits are recognizing a return on their investment and are allocating financial resources and offering incentives for experienced adults to be involved in social purpose work.

Most importantly, it is estimated that Experienced Adults Ending Homelessness has directly added to housing security for more than 200 Grand Rapids families who were either homeless or on the brink of homelessness. The project has shown that a modest investment can have a big payoff: When you create opportunities that are compelling, fulfilling, and rewarding, experienced adults are ready and willing to use their time and talents to address community needs.

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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