

# MOBILIZING MAINE'S 50+ POPULATION TO LEAD COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION



Midway into the last decade, Maine, like many parts of the United States, faced demographic forces driving major change. As the first of the Baby Boom generation passed age 60, Maine's population growth slowed and even began to decline. Mainers were already the country's oldest population, and growing older.

As the economy stalled in 2008 and financial resources grew more scarce, the Maine Community Foundation felt a growing urgency around the need to mobilize the state's pool of human talent. In particular, the Foundation was concerned about low participation by older adults in local and state government and in nonprofit leadership positions. The Foundation did not have a focus on aging or "senior issues," but nevertheless, came to believe that if the state's most experienced residents were reluctant to pick up the leadership mantle, it was a deep loss for all Mainers.

Experienced adults age 50 and up—many of whom had a lifetime of accumulated knowledge about their communities, extensive personal and professional networks, and problem-solving skills they developed while raising families and building careers—were a critical, underused resource. What if this resource could be tapped? What could be accomplished?

## AT-A-GLANCE

### MAINE'S ENCORPS INITIATIVE

#### COMMUNITY ISSUE

Smart Growth: promoting healthy communities, people and environments

#### COLLABORATORS

Maine Community Foundation

University of Maine Center On Aging

Maine Development Foundation

Maine Senior College Network

AARP Maine

State of Maine Office of Elder Services

Maine Municipal Association

Institute for Civic Leadership

And hundreds of nonprofit and civic organizations

#### GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Statewide

Total population = 1.3 million

55+ population = 416,000 (31%)

#### RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

250+ volunteers advancing the work of 475+ organizations

Community-level impacts in 120 cities and towns, in every county in the state

85,000+ hours of service (valued at more than \$1.5 million)

\$1.3 million raised to support the program

**ENCORps is about taking care of all of Maine, from its beautiful natural resources to its cities and towns and the people who live here. Designed specifically for Mainers 50 years of age and older, regardless of background or experience, ENCORps is for everyday Maine people who care about the world around them and want to do their small part to make it better.**

### **From Idea to Action**

The Foundation decided to conduct a statewide survey of Mainers 50 and older, seeking to understand their interests and the barriers that discouraged civic participation. With 400 respondents, the survey's success was itself a sign that older Mainers cared about these questions. Many said they welcomed more opportunities to help create sustainable change in their communities, but felt they would need training to be effective as well as help figuring out where they could use their skills to make the biggest impact. A few themes stood out: Maine's experienced adults had strong individual perspectives and passions, many with a local community focus. They felt deeply about the need to preserve and improve quality of life so that future generations would want to call Maine home. Most importantly, few were looking merely for ways to pass time; what got older Mainers excited was the possibility of creating meaningful, lasting change.

The Foundation convened an advisory group that included public and community-based agencies, professional associations, and university research and training units. That group looked carefully at survey results and began formulating potential approaches that would reflect the diversity of individual passions, the focus on local issues, and the Foundation's commitment to driving impact across the entire state. The original concern about the lack of participation by older adults in government and nonprofit organizations gave way to an expanded concept of civic leadership. The Foundation came to see its core objective with this work was to create community change agents, broadly defined. With the proper training and encouragement, experienced adults could potentially use a wide range of strategies and tackle diverse types of issues in order to revitalize their communities.

Soon after, one of the advisors—the University of Maine Center On Ageing—received a grant through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to create a training program promoting older adult volunteerism focused on “smart growth.” The Foundation and the Center On Aging

immediately saw an opportunity to merge their efforts to achieve greater impact. The Center would be able to expand beyond training to follow and support older adults as they put their leadership skills into use in their local communities, while the Foundation saw smart growth as an appropriately broad umbrella for addressing quality of life, including public, environmental, and economic health.

Christened the Encore Leadership Corps (ENCORps), the initiative officially launched in 2010. Its goals were to build a statewide leadership training program for older adults and, by increasing older adult civic participation, to promote healthy communities, people, and environments by addressing the impact of growth and development on the natural resources of Maine's communities.

### **Training and Supporting Older Adult Leaders**

The program launched with a two-day leadership training summit. The curriculum combined specific skills training with information about Maine, its government and nonprofit sectors, and how change happens. The program also included a separate training in volunteer recruitment and management for organizations interested in working with ENCORps participants or other older community members. More than 90 adults age 50 and over, as well as representatives from 28 nonprofit and municipal agencies, attended this first summit.

Repeated each year since, the annual summit has trained more than 250 adults between the ages of 50 and 88, with an average participant age of 66. The program attracts a group with existing knowledge who are looking for new ways to use that knowledge: 83 percent of the participants have a college degree, and 46 percent have a graduate degree. Over its first three years, nine out of every ten volunteers stayed active in ENCORps. Only about half of participants are retired, and roughly 85 percent initially came to the ENCORps training as existing volunteer leaders, such as nonprofit board members or project leaders.

As a relative outsider to the smart growth field, the Center On Aging has fostered relationships with partners working on issues such as land conservation, water quality, downtown revitalization, fitness and health, and other environmental, economic and public health concerns. For older adults who were not already in existing leadership roles, ENCorps helps connect them with opportunities through these partner relationships.

Often, though, the encouragement that ENCorps provides is a spark that ignites new ideas for improving communities. From the beginning, the program has encouraged all participants to view themselves as leaders, define their own objectives, and blaze the trail that is right for them. Predominantly professionals, volunteers appreciate a flexible approach, enabling them to do work that aligns with their passions, while at the same time accessing a strong network that supports them and makes them feel valued.

### **A Resource for Tackling Many Kinds of Change**

For Maine Community Foundation, the Center On Aging, and their collaborators, smart growth is just the beginning. The program recently secured new funding for a pilot project, Boomer Reporting Corps, which trains older adult volunteers with media and reporting skills. Another funder has tapped ENCorps to tackle food insecurity. There is virtually no limit to the interests and abilities of Maine's 50+ population, and it's clear that these leaders will be active, effective champions for Maine's communities for years to come.



The ENCorps program's smart growth leaders are championing issues they care about: mixed land use, environmentally friendly transit, resident participation in local decision making, localized resources, activities that encourage healthy lifestyles, preservation of open spaces, and more. They have led improvements in 120 towns and cities across the state, including:

- raising funds to purchase sports equipment for needy children
- leading a town's economic development planning effort
- creating a volunteer program to clean snow from one Maine city's sidewalks for easier boarding of buses
- coordinating a weekly farmers' market to increase business downtown
- organizing community events to build and install more than 1,000 energy-efficient window inserts
- advocating for new public fire services
- securing funds for land conservation
- running for public office—planning board, school committee or town council
- and other achievements that create healthier, more sustainable communities for people of all ages

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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