

MOBILIZING OLDER ADULTS FOR BETTER EARLY CHILDHOOD OUTCOMES



Oregon is a state with a deep commitment to its next generation. Early childhood education is championed by the governor, embraced by the general public as a civic priority, and being addressed by many individuals and organizations. Yet each year an estimated 40 percent of children born in the state—about 18,000—are exposed to risk factors that adversely impact their ability to succeed in school and develop into happy, healthy, productive adults.

The issue is well-researched: A great deal of evidence indicates that certain interventions are highly effective for improving early childhood outcomes in diverse communities across the nation. There are clear ways to make a difference, but they require investment; the challenge is not figuring out what to do, but finding the resources to do it. The reality, though, is that early childhood education programs in Oregon—as in most American communities—struggle with limited resources to provide essential services. Waiting lists for programs serving at-risk children and families are common.

The Oregon Community Foundation has worked for more than four decades to improve the lives of Oregonians, including a central focus on promoting school readiness. By 2009, when the recession was hitting hardest, the gap between need and available resources had grown even more acute. With existing funds for early care and education in jeopardy and slim likelihood that new sources of sustainable funding would be found, the Foundation began looking for a creative way to work around the financial barriers. At a Foundation board meeting, someone wondered aloud about the state's large pool of retired professional educators. Could they be part of a potential solution?

"We do have a large population of older adults," says Mary Louise McClintock, director of Education Programs at the Foundation. "Oregon is a place where people come to retire. We have a strong culture of volunteering, and older adults here are involved and looking for the same things others are looking for everywhere in the country." According to the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis, the state's over-65 population will grow faster than any other age group. By 2020, there will be 48 percent more people aged 65 and older living in Oregon than there were in 2010. Would it be possible, the Foundation wondered, to mobilize retired educators—and perhaps skilled older adults with other

AT-A-GLANCE

OREGON'S BOOMERS AND BABIES INITIATIVE

COMMUNITY ISSUE

Improving early childhood outcomes

COLLABORATORS

The Oregon Community Foundation

United Way of the Columbia-Willamette

Knowledge Universe

Juan Young Trust

Oregon Volunteers (Oregon Commission for Voluntary Action and Service)

Oregon State University

Portland State University

PGE Foundation

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Statewide

Total population = 3.9 million

55+ population = 1.1 million (29%)

RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

Nearly 1,000 boomer-age volunteers joined eight early child care and education programs in urban, suburban, and rural Oregon communities—including 700 new volunteers

21,616 contributed hours of service by boomer-age volunteers

3,000+ children served directly and nearly 7,000 indirectly

An additional 2,000+ non-boomer volunteers provided 61,846 hours of service

Eight funded child care and education programs hosted Boomers and Babies volunteers

34 providers joined in two learning communities to help leverage older adult volunteers

Volunteers are helping to lower child-to-adult classroom ratios, offering parent education and supports, reducing administrative expenses, and more

Developed comprehensive, free resources to help early care and education programs leverage volunteers (ready4volunteers.org)

backgrounds—as a new human resource for early care and education providers? Could the generation entering retirement use its experience and talents to make a difference for the generation about to enter school?

From Big Idea to Concrete Action

The folks at the Foundation had the seeds of an idea—tapping older adult volunteers to help early care organizations better serve children and families—but what they did not have was a program plan. What kinds of roles would interest older adult volunteers? What roles would bring the most value and have the greatest impact? How would the existing early care system need to adapt to successfully integrate older adult volunteers? What kinds of investment would it take to make this idea a reality? With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies' Community Experience Partnership, a national initiative to tap experienced adults to address important community issues, the Foundation began an 18-month planning period intended to answer these questions. They called their effort Boomers and Babies.

The Foundation put together an advisory committee that included AARP, the Institute on Aging at Portland State University, and other experts on early childhood development, civic engagement, and the needs and interests of older adults. They brainstormed potential approaches, such as ways to leverage experienced adult volunteers to enhance the existing early care workforce, and mobilizing older adults as policy advocates. A key unanswered question was whether it made sense to design roles that included direct engagement with children—for example, working side-by-side in classrooms with pre-kindergarten teachers. The advisors recommended doing some focused research about how to best engage boomer volunteers to support early childhood development, and Oregon State University came on board to conduct a study.

The academic team polled older adults in order to understand their motivations and willingness to join in an early care and education effort. They also analyzed the existing early care infrastructure to identify promising entry points. The study provided an important framework for understanding the many variables at play and developing implementation strategies. Before committing to a large-scale investment, however, the Foundation wanted to test the idea and explore potential programmatic approaches in real-world settings. They decided to fund three one-year pilot projects.

Interestingly, several initial research findings ultimately were not borne out by experience. The study anticipated that early care organizations would struggle to adapt their systems and practices in order to effectively integrate older adult volunteers, and that many older adults who cared about this issue would balk if asked to work directly with children. In fact, the three Boomers and Babies pilot projects told a different story. With solid commitment at all levels of the organization along with the proper technical support, early care providers were able to adapt the ways they did their work in order to make good use of highly skilled volunteers. Many of the older adult volunteers, meanwhile, thrived in the classroom once they had a little encouragement and experienced the satisfaction of interacting with children. The research surfaced potential barriers, and the pilots demonstrated ways to get past those barriers effectively.

"I really credit the direction we had from the Community Experience Partnership," remarks McClintock. "There was a lot of emphasis on having a real, measurable impact on a community need." Planners looked at the body of knowledge about early childhood development and committed to interventions that were backed up by evidence. Child-to-adult ratios were key: "We know there are ways that volunteers in the classroom can contribute to positive child outcomes, like the opportunity to



The Tangible Benefits of Engaging Older Adults to Improve Early Childhood Outcomes

Boomers and Babies has demonstrated a concrete return on investment when early childhood care providers build volunteer programs that leverage older adults. In the Oregon project, many boomer volunteers brought relevant experience from careers as educators, health care providers, mental health workers, and social workers. The documented benefits include:

- improved outcomes for children by lowering child-to-adult ratios in classrooms, delivering enrichment activities (e.g., music, structured games, gardening), spending time in one-on-one literacy activities, and providing consistent relationships with caring adults
- improved outcomes for parents by expanding their opportunities to engage with providers, offering parenting education and other supports, and extending a hand in friendship
- professional development of paid staff through mentoring by volunteers with prior experience in the early care field
- the ability to offer programs that would not be possible without volunteers (e.g., clothes closets, microgrants, community gardens)
- reduced administrative expenses
- expanded private sources of funding
- heightened community awareness of early childhood issues through public speaking, word of mouth, and social networking

Learn more about Boomers and Babies evaluation findings at ready4volunteers.org/about-us.

“We know there are ways that volunteers in the classroom can contribute to positive child outcomes, like the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship with a child, giving children more time with books and language, and contributing to lower group sizes and child-adult ratios.”

—Mary Louise McClintock, Oregon Community Foundation

develop a meaningful relationship with a child, giving children more time with books and language, and contributing to lower group sizes and child-adult ratios,” McClintock says. For this reason, the project chose to focus its work on organizations that were committed to having older adults directly engaged with children regularly and in a sustained way. At the same time, from the beginning the Foundation also emphasized that early childhood organizations should offer a variety of volunteer activity options.

Scaling Up

After the first year, Boomers and Babies was ready to apply the lessons learned from the research and pilot projects. To scale up, the project pursued five interrelated strategies:

- Two learning community cohorts of early childhood organizations were created, reaching a total of 34 providers from across the state. Participating organizations completed volunteer management audits, developed volunteer management plans, and attended two networking/training events. Each received a \$5,000 planning grant as well as support and coaching from the Boomers and Babies project staff.
- Eight agencies were selected and received larger, multi-year grants (between \$30,000 and \$40,000 annually) to develop and operate boomer volunteer programs focused on direct interaction with at-risk children. Each agency supported a volunteer coordinator who instituted appropriate volunteer management practices to recruit, screen, place, train, supervise, and recognize/reward volunteers.
- Boomers and Babies provided training to the eight funded organizations through biannual convenings that featured subject matter experts, project “share-outs,” skill-building workshops, and peer consultations. Grantee partners also received direct support from Boomers and Babies project staff.
- Oregon State University evaluated the initiative’s impact on program capacity and children’s experiences (see findings at ready4volunteers.org/about-us).
- The project raised awareness of older adult volunteerism through feature stories, the creation of promotional videos, and development of a comprehensive resource website (see ready4volunteers.org).

Over a three-year period, Boomers and Babies developed on-the-ground experience building volunteer programs designed to leverage older adults, while promoting effective practices to a wider group of providers. Participating organizations learned that to get the most benefit from their boomer volunteer programs, they needed to be willing to make some upfront investments—for example, taking the time to match older adults with specific and meaningful classroom roles based on their interests and expertise. Most volunteers did fill a caregiver role,

working in classrooms, but others were better suited to different kinds of jobs. Some did administrative work or helped organize activities for fellow volunteers. A few became board members at provider organizations. At some sites, older adult volunteers built bookshelves or helped maintain facilities. Another volunteer concentrated on doing community outreach, and was ultimately hired to do that work.

Fundamentally, the most successful programs took steps to ensure their older adult volunteers were fully integrated as members of the providers’ teams. It was critical that someone within the provider organization had clear responsibility for coordinating volunteers. Providers also began training volunteers to increase their knowledge about child development and boost their confidence in working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. As importantly, paid staff needed training in how to welcome volunteers and give them meaningful tasks to do. “You need the executive director and the board and supervisors at every level [of the provider organization] committed to making this work,” McClintock says. “The executive director of one of our sites was fond of saying, ‘Everyone’s a volunteer coordinator at our organization.’ It worked for them. Volunteers were welcomed and it was just part of the culture.” The more the volunteer program became central to the organization’s philosophy and practices, the more value it created.

“None of this is rocket science,” McClintock adds, “but it does take discipline and persistence to get it right. Much of what the collaborators learned about how to work with older adult volunteers represents effective practices for engaging volunteers of any age.” The eight Boomers and Babies sites did not limit their programs to boomers—they ended up recruiting dedicated volunteers across the age spectrum. If anything, the on-the-ground experience in Oregon has shown that efforts targeting the boomer generation often lead to success with other demographics, and can yield even greater results.

Long-Term Expansion

From the beginning, the Foundation intended Boomers and Babies to be a learning initiative—one that would demonstrate that volunteerism is a cost-effective way to bring much-needed resources to the early childhood field, and that would offer a blueprint that providers could adopt to implement their own volunteer programs. To facilitate replication of this approach, the Foundation has developed a comprehensive collection of resources, available on the web at ready4volunteers.org. They also documented an economic case for volunteer management in the early care field using one of the participating sites as an example (see ready4volunteers.org/documents/articles/Case-for-Volunteer-Mgmt-06mar13.pdf). They hope these materials will encourage early childhood organizations to integrate boomer volunteers as part of their teams.

As for the original eight funded Boomers and Babies partners, most have secured funding to sustain and advance the work of engaging older adults in early childhood education. Many are cultivating volunteer leaders to increase their capacity to attract and retain older adult volunteers. The Foundation also made a grant to Portland State University to explore and document business models for the long-term sustainability of older adult volunteer programs in early childhood education organizations. The Graduate School of Education and the Institute on Aging in the School of Community Health will lead this effort. In addition, as a result of the positive experience with Boomers and Babies, the Foundation revised its funding priorities for responsive grantmaking to offer support for programs that engage volunteers in promoting the social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children.

With vision and commitment, Oregon's early child care and education field is proving that older adults are a highly valuable community resource—an expanding pool of talent, energy, and dedication with much to offer.

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the country, and
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