

# Data-Driven Benefits of Senior Volunteerism

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## History of Retirement

- ❖ For most of history, only the ultra-wealthy “retired”
- ❖ Most people *didn't* retire a century ago
- ❖ In America, life expectancies began to grow drastically in the 1900s

### Average Life Expectancy

1900 → 47

1935 → 63

- ❖ By the 1930s, more Americans lived into their 60s and 70s.
- ❖ In 1933, the Great Depression saw an unemployment rate of 25%
- ❖ In 1935, Social Security was launched to tackle both
  - ❖ Subsidized retirement for millions of aging workers
  - ❖ Opened up job roles for young workers to step up into
- ❖ By 2021 the life expectancy had climbed to 78 and the retirement age was still at 63.

“An army of new older helpers is just waiting for the opportunities and social nudge to get them going.”

- Ken Dychtwald



A photograph of three people walking outdoors on a paved path. On the left, a man with sunglasses and a mustache wears a grey puffer jacket over a blue and white plaid shirt and khaki pants. In the center, a Black man wears a dark blue puffer jacket and brown pants. On the right, a woman wears a teal jacket over a grey shirt and dark pants. They are all smiling and appear to be in conversation. The background shows a body of water and a building under a clear sky.

## How are we doing, Volunteer State?

- ▶ Tennessee regularly ranks around 30<sup>th</sup> place in how many residents volunteer
- ▶ Only 30% of Tennesseans volunteer
- ▶ 51% of residents in Utah volunteer
- ▶ 60% of U.S. states have higher volunteer rates than Tennessee



# How are we doing, Volunteer State?

- ▶ Two-thirds of volunteers decreased their time during 2020 due to the pandemic
- ▶ Over the past decade:
  - ▶ The average retiree watched 47 hours of TV a week.
  - ▶ Less than 25% of seniors volunteer at all.

# Age Wave, Edward Jones, & Harris Interactive found:

Asked what they need to volunteer, seniors said:

- ▶ More direction and guidance
- ▶ User-friendly resources to find opportunities
- ▶ Service activities that use their experience, talents, or interests



BLOOD  
PRESSURES

## The Good News: Seniors Want to Volunteer!

89% of retirees agreed with this:

► “There should be more ways for retirees to put their talents and knowledge to use for the benefit of their communities and society.”

How much time would they like to contribute?

► Average response: 3 hours, 20 minutes a week



# Adding Up Impact

- ▶ 3.3 hours a week sounded low, but...
- ▶ It's 4x the current volunteer contributions of seniors
- ▶ 47 million retirees giving 3.3 hours a week would equal:
  - 155 million hours of community service a week
  - 8 billion hours a year
  - Over 3.8 million full-time, year-round civic servants
  - An estimated \$240 billion of economic value annually

## Seniors: A Growing Demographic

Number of retirees:

In 2010: 35 million

In 2020: 47 million

By 2030: 70 million

By 2050: 90 million



- ▶ This growing demographic makes for growing relevance in society as a whole, and a larger potential impact on local organizations they serve

# Senior Volunteerism is Good for Society

“We could have thousands of thriving schools and nonprofits boosted by retirees’ savvy, life experience and connections; millions of disadvantaged students on the path to higher education thanks to the loving support of elder mentors and sponsors; fragile elders in nursing homes looked after by healthy elder advocates; countless young workers and parents benefiting from being coached and mentored by older adults.”

- Ken Dychtwald, Senior Researcher

# 1. Seniors = Skills

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- ▶ Experience
- ▶ Perspective
- ▶ Well-honed skills
  
- ▶ Professional development
- ▶ Leadership experience
- ▶ Degrees, certifications, & more

For every \$1 invested in a skilled volunteer, organizations average a return of \$8 in services.  
- engAGED

# 1. Seniors = Skills

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Remember, seniors spent a lifetime as:

- ▶ Caregivers
- ▶ Teachers
- ▶ Lawyers
- ▶ Doctors
- ▶ Architects, and more!



Strive to:

- ▶ Match assignments with their gifts
- ▶ Use applications, interviews, and surveys to learn their gifts
- ▶ Don't shy away from having volunteer roles that require upper-level skills
- ▶ Let them lead or mentor other vols

## 2. Seniors are often more Reliable, Consistent, Dedicated, and Available

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- ▶ Older adults have the highest average annual hours of service of any age group. (AmeriCorps)
  - ▶ Age 65-74 averages 81 hours a year
  - ▶ Age 75+ average 100+ hours a year

Seniors who do volunteer commit more time to their volunteer activities than do all other age groups.

- Psychological Bulletin

## 2. Seniors are often more Reliable, Consistent, Dedicated, and Available

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Retention increases as service and authority role increases

79% retention rate among volunteers who serve 12+ weeks

53% among those who serve 1 week a year

74.8% retention for volunteers who do professional and managerial tasks

55.6% among those who do general labor or supply transportation

# 3. Seniors Have Wide Social and Professional Networks

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Volunteers can:

- ▶ Recruit other volunteers
- ▶ Line up speaking opportunities
- ▶ Table at events for staff
- ▶ Connect you with donors and other community resources



# Volunteerism is Good for the Senior

“Make Giving Back Your Second Act”

v.

“I’ve put in my time already.”

When they ask, “What's in it for me?”

Say, “Doing Good is Good for You!”



# 1. Physical Health Benefits

Increased physical activity associated with volunteerism improves:

- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Strength
- ▶ Circulation
- ▶ Stamina

The motivation to stay active that volunteerism ignites is a benefit that lasts 3 years after service ends.

Volunteering can be preventative:

- ▶ Seniors who give 4 hours a week are 40% less likely to develop high blood pressure
- ▶ Senior volunteers are less likely to experience a hip fracture than non-volunteering peers
- ▶ 25% of senior volunteers say service helps them manage a chronic illness

# 1. Physical Health Benefits (cont.)

- ▶ 95% of senior volunteers agree that service enables them to engage in other meaningful activities.
- ▶ 84% of AmeriCorps Seniors surveyed reported stable or improving health over a 2-year period
- ▶ More vulnerable individuals may benefit the most from volunteering.

You're living longer, why not make good use of your time?

- Aetna



## 2. Cognitive Benefits

Volunteering has been shown to improve:

- ▶ Verbal learning
- ▶ Memory
- ▶ Executive function skills
- ▶ 47% risk reduction of developing dementia was evidenced in a study of senior volunteers in Sweden

Offer seniors volunteer roles that include social, physical, and cognitive tasks - it's a win-win!

8.6 million Americans are expected to suffer Alzheimer's disease over the next 50 years.

- Journal of Gerontology

## 2. Cognitive Benefits (cont.)

Volunteering provides the opportunity to learn and practice. New learning:

- ▶ Keeps the brain active
- ▶ Challenges in a healthy way
- ▶ New routines help seniors take on new challenges outside of service

Cognitive benefits are proven in both objective assessment and neuroimaging studies.



Older adults report new learning as one of the primary benefits they experience as a function of their volunteer work.

- Psychological Bulletin

# 3. Mental Health Benefits

Senior volunteerism:

- ▶ Reduces depression
  - ▶ 78% of AmeriCorps volunteers surveyed reported fewer symptoms of depression
- ▶ Provides purpose and identity
- ▶ Improves self-esteem
  - ▶ 94% of senior volunteers say service improves their mood
- ▶ Alleviates boredom

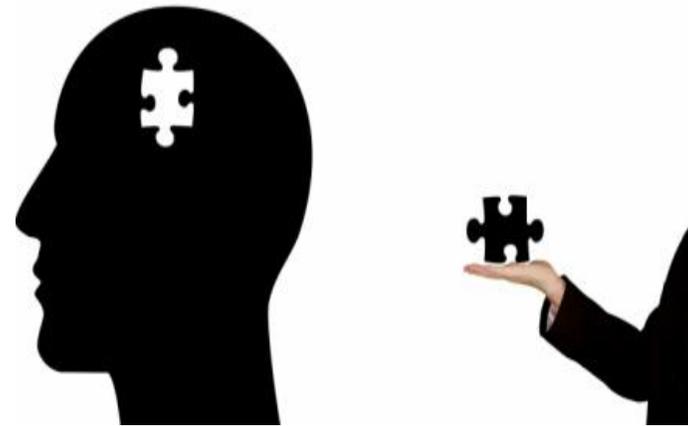
Seniors note that volunteering gave them the opportunity to refine or completely redefine who they are - and what is important in their lives.

- Psychological Bulletin

# 3. Mental Health Benefits (cont.)

## Senior Volunteerism:

- ▶ Improves self-esteem
  - ▶ Volunteers report "feeling useful" and "self-fulfillment" as benefits
- ▶ Boosts happiness
  - ▶ Service, altruism, and positive social contact all release endorphins
- ▶ Reduces stress
  - ▶ Appreciation, purpose, and activity help take mind off worries



## 4. Social Network Benefits

1 in 3 adults age 45 and older feel lonely.

Isolation and loneliness are worse for health than obesity

Health risks of prolonged isolation is roughly equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes - every day



Volunteers meet new people, from staff to volunteers to clients or customers

Volunteering prevents social isolation

- ▶ 88% of AmeriCorps Seniors surveyed reported fewer feelings of isolation.
- ▶ 71% reported improved level of companionship

## 4. Social Network Benefits (cont.)

Seniors note "volunteering allowed them to meet new people, make friends, and develop a sense of community."

Regular service significantly increases the number of people they can turn to for help

There is absolutely nothing that beats the value of face-to-face interaction. The nice thing about volunteering is it gives you a chance to interact in person.

- Richard Morycz,  
University of Pittsburgh

## 4. Social Network Benefits (cont.)

All too often, older adults are vulnerable to loneliness. Volunteering lets them make meaningful connections in their community while lowering their risk of health problems and dementia. It's no exaggeration to say that volunteering is good for the mind, body and soul."

- Garth Graham, MD

## 5. Other Benefits



- ▶ Stress management: 6-year studies show volunteering buffers the relationship between stressful life events and mortality
- ▶ Increased resilience: Physical, mental, and emotional, volunteerism helps seniors mitigate life crises
- ▶ Overall, volunteering is associated with a 24% reduction in mortality risk compared to non-volunteering seniors

## 5. Other Benefits: Pathway to Senior Employment

- ▶ Looks good on the resume
- ▶ Builds relationships
- ▶ Acquires references
- ▶ Keeps skills in practice
- ▶ Maintains long-term motivation

AmeriCorps discovered volunteerism is associated with a 27% increased odds of employment

- ▶ This increased to 51% for those without a high school diploma
- ▶ And 55% for those who live in rural areas
- ▶ The study determined the tie between volunteering and employment was true across gender and age demographics

# What then shall we do?



- ▶ Teach staff and volunteers about the benefits of volunteerism
- ▶ Invite volunteers to be ambassadors for your cause
- ▶ Partner with senior-volunteerism programs
- ▶ Promote where seniors go
- ▶ Focus on the communication methods your demographic appreciates

## Social Media?

- ▶ Face to face (tabling, events) and paper (mail, brochures) are more reliable
- ▶ More seniors do have social media today
  - ▶ YouTube is the most used platform
  - ▶ Facebook popular with age 30-65

# What then shall we do?

## Be mindful of marketing:

- ▶ Marketing should convey "We are a senior friendly place to serve"
- ▶ Style marketing materials in ways that promote senior volunteers
  - ▶ Photos of seniors volunteering
  - ▶ Directly advertise for seniors
    - ▶ "Looking for seniors!"
    - ▶ "Ideal opportunity for retirees!"

## Socially isolated?

People who could most benefit from volunteering are harder to reach

Market to "people who know people"

- ▶ "Share this with anyone you know who could benefit from serving!"
- ▶ "Do you know anyone who would enjoy volunteering for us?"



# What then shall we do?

## Appreciation

- ▶ Create opportunities to appreciate and thank senior volunteers
- ▶ Ask younger volunteers to contribute to thanking the seniors who serve
- ▶ At events for "all volunteers," take a moment to thank and recognize the retirees who are giving back

## Accommodation

- ▶ Sometimes rules aren't one-size fits all
- ▶ Make reasonable accommodations for seniors who serve
  - ▶ Can they be seated?
  - ▶ Take more breaks?
- ▶ Consider parking, stairs, distance to walk, technology, etc.

“Senior volunteers are not only improving the lives of others. They are also improving their own. These volunteers are feeling healthier and less depressed. What’s also exciting is they say they feel less socially isolated, which we know has important health benefits. Along the way, they found a sense of accomplishment, opportunities for personal growth, and chances to form meaningful relationships.”

- Deborah Cox-Roush, AmeriCorps Seniors