Linking Generations for a Stronger Community

America’s rapidly increasing population of older adults represents a vast and under-tapped resource. Their time, energy, and financial resources can make a substantial difference in improving the lives of children and youth. By investing in programs that connect people on both ends of the age spectrum, grantmakers can create opportunities for the young and the old to use their skills and experiences to help each other as well as their communities.

Today, there are more than 36.7 million Americans over 65 years old, representing 12.4 percent of the population. By 2020, one in six Americans—16.6 percent—will be over the age of 65. Many of these older adults are seeking ways to remain active in their communities and find new meaning in their lives. Others need assistance as they deal with the challenges of aging. Young people not only benefit from older adults’ volunteer time, but also can provide assistance to older people, or partner with them to address community problems.

In all of these cases, grantmakers can play a critical role by encouraging and supporting innovative intergenerational strategies that connect children and youth with older residents in ways that benefit all.

Challenges To Be Addressed
People in our communities are usually segregated by age. Children spend their days in schools or childcare centers, while many older adults live or socialize in age-isolated facilities or programs. This can create unhealthy isolation for older adults and prevent young people from understanding the full cycle of life or experiencing the wisdom of people in their 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond.

A significant number of both children and older adults face serious life challenges. Witness these statistics:

**Children and Youth**
- About 40% of children (29.2 million) in the United States live in low-income families.¹
- In 2001, over 40% of children ages 3–5 who were not yet in kindergarten were not read to daily by a family member.²
- Only 43% of young adults have non-parent adults they can turn to for support and advice.³
- Six million middle and high school students are at risk of dropping out of school.⁴

³ Percentages of 6th- to 12th-Grade Youth Experiencing Each Asset, (retrieved February 23, 2006) www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetfreqs.html

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1.) Older Adults Serving Young People

There is a wide range of programs in which older people can provide critical support to young people and their families. Older adults can offer children and youth tutoring, mentoring, nurturing, or recreation activities, or supplement under-funded school programs like art, music, and physical education. They can “be there” for children in families addressing issues surrounding welfare to work, child abuse, or alcohol and substance abuse. In addition, involving older adults with children and youth can generate greater community support for school and youth programs.

Grantmakers can foster the involvement of older adults in helping young people by supporting local programs like these:

- **Experience Corps**, a national initiative in 14 cities, mobilizes older adults to devote 15 hours per week to enhancing the reading and writing skills of students in elementary schools. Older volunteers receive training and support, work in teams, and receive stipends. ([www.experiencecorps.org](http://www.experiencecorps.org))
- **San Pasqual Academy** in Escondido, California, a residential facility for foster youth, engages older adults as mentors. These elders teach independent living skills and help youth transition out of foster care. ([www.sanpasqualacademy.org](http://www.sanpasqualacademy.org))
- **Family Friends** enlists older volunteers in 35 communities to work with children with disabilities or chronic illnesses in their homes and to provide respite for the children’s families. ([www.family-friends.org](http://www.family-friends.org))
- **Intergenerational Bridges** in Montgomery County, Maryland, is an after-school mentoring program that pairs newly arrived immigrant children with supportive older adult mentors to assist with the transition to U.S. culture, language acquisition, and personal development, as well as to be friendly, encouraging listeners. ([www.interages.com/programs/bridges.php](http://www.interages.com/programs/bridges.php))

2.) Young People Serving Older Adults

Young people can provide an array of helpful services to older people including teaching the use of computers, visiting those who are isolated, and helping with home chores. Reports show that students who volunteer do better in school than...
their counterparts who don’t volunteer. The young people develop a sense of belonging in their community, and through serving older people, they often gain an appreciation for the wholeness of life and learn that growing old is normal and natural.

Funders may wish to replicate in their own communities programs like the following:

- **The Intergenerational Work/Study Program** coordinated by the New York City Department on Aging places high school students as workers in a wide range of programs serving older people. Students can receive credits in exchange for service. Begun with private funding, this program is now supported with public funds. ([www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/volunteering/intergenerational.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/volunteering/intergenerational.shtml))
- **Computer Pals** in Seattle, Washington empowers middle school and high school students as tutors who help older people connect to technology.
- **Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders)** recruits and trains students at 22 colleges and universities across the country to teach English to older immigrants and refugees, prepare them to become U.S. citizens, and help them access health care services. ([www.projectshine.org](http://www.projectshine.org))
- **The ManaTEEN Club** in Bradenton, Florida, runs the Home Safety for Seniors program, which involves teens in evaluating older adults’ needs and installing in their homes such items as bathtub rails, deadbolts, and smoke alarms.

3.) **Shared Site Intergenerational Programs**

Intergenerational shared sites are programs where children, youth, and older adults receive services at the same site. Both generations interact during regularly scheduled activities, as well as through informal encounters. While the structures vary, these programs generally have two components; one that serves older adults and another that serves children or youth. Because of the close proximity of the two programs, sharing a site offers increased opportunities for intergenerational interaction and relationship building. Shared site programs also offer the unique opportunity to share resources such as a kitchen, office equipment, and staff members across programs.

Grantmakers can foster collaboration and help create programs like these:

- **Grandma’s House** is an intergenerational care facility in Orlando, Florida, where older adults in need of long-term care and children with rehabilitative and chronic needs receive collective care. ([www.grandmasgang.com](http://www.grandmasgang.com))
- **Outside Boston, older learners from Lasell Village**, a continuing care retirement community on the campus of Lasell College, participate side-by-side with traditional college-age students in intergenerational classes and other campus activities. ([www.lasell.edu/path/village.asp](http://www.lasell.edu/path/village.asp))
- **ONEgeneration** in Van Nuys, California, offers co-located day services for both frail older people and young children. All staff members are cross-trained, and there are at least eight intergenerational activities each day. ([www.onegeneration.org](http://www.onegeneration.org))
- **The Rocori Senior Center** in Cold Spring, Minnesota, is located in the Rocori Middle School. Senior center members sing in the school choir and are living history classroom speakers. They also work in the media center and chaperone dances. ([www.rocori.k12.mn.us/CommunityEd/scinfo1.htm](http://www.rocori.k12.mn.us/CommunityEd/scinfo1.htm))

4.) **Young and Old Serving the Community Together**

Working together, young people and older adults gain appreciation and respect for one another while benefiting their community.

Funders make it possible for the young and old to work together in programs like these:

- **Habitat Intergenerational Program (HIP)** in Belmont, Massachusetts, brings together older adults and youth to provide environmental community services including: removing invasive species, helping to rejuvenate a pond, restoring walking trails, and using native plants to create wildlife habitat areas at schools. ([www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Habitat/index.php](http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Habitat/index.php))
- **Full Circle Theater**, a troupe of younger and older improvisational actors in Philadelphia, provides interactive workshops on conflict resolution, men’s and women’s health, AIDS education and prevention, violence prevention, and avoiding the use of tobacco. ([www.fullcircletheater.org](http://www.fullcircletheater.org))
- **Arizona Intergenerational Advocacy Partnership** brings a group of seniors and students together annually for a day and a half to study issues of mutual interest and

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**NATIONAL RESOURCES**

**Generations United**
for more background or information on any program in this briefing
[www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org) or contact
202-289-3979 or gu@gu.org

**Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning**
for tools, training, model programs
[www.templecil.org](http://www.templecil.org)

**Experience Corps**
for tutoring and mentoring programs
[www.experiencecorps.org](http://www.experiencecorps.org)

**Penn State University Intergenerational Programs and Aging**
for activities, curriculum, and research
[http://ageexted.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/](http://ageexted.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/)
Plan and Implement Carefully
Although intergenerational programs can reap incredible rewards for communities, they are not easy. The majority of youth-serving organizations do not have a thorough understanding of older people, and most organizations working with older adults are unaware of the concerns of today’s schools, childcare programs, and youth-serving organizations. Careful preparation and planning are key to successful intergenerational programs. Funders can assure success for all involved by supporting intergenerational initiatives with the qualities that research and experience indicate yield positive results.

• Clear and meaningful roles for all participants.
• Opportunities for participants to build on existing skills or learn new ones.
• Meaningful contact between participants that intentionally fosters relationships.
• Relevant activities that are developmentally appropriate and meet real community needs.
• Opportunities for participants to both give to and receive from other generations.
• Early training and orientation for youth and older adults, both separate and together.
• Staff and administrative buy-in of all partnering organizations.
• Opportunities for feedback, reflection, and evaluation.
• Celebration of accomplishments and acknowledgement of the contributions made by all.

Qualities of Successful Intergenerational Programs

Getting Started In Your Community

• Learn of intergenerational initiatives in your community by contacting Generations United, the United Way, your schools, and local large multi-service organizations.
• Obtain your United Way’s community needs assessment and identify intergenerational strategies that could address some of the needs.
• Ask children and youth-serving organizations you fund how they involve older adults and how they might engage them in the future to build the capacity of their programs.
• Fund training sessions for grantees or the larger community on developing intergenerational strategies.
• Support collaboration between organizations serving children and youth and those serving older people such as senior housing and retirement communities, AARP, senior centers, RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program), and Foster Grandparents.
• Create an intergenerational project fund in partnership with other funders, that incorporates the qualities of successful intergenerational programs.
• Include intergenerational language in your grant guidelines or requests for proposals.

Credits
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