

VI. LEISURE AND VOLUNTEERISM Task Force

Summary

This report discusses the status of seniors in Tompkins County in regard to recreation and volunteerism. It divides recreation into the following categories: fitness, socialization, expressive arts, performing arts, nature/outdoor, travel, educational and sports/games. It points out the resources that exist in each of these categories and highlights that the only central listing is located at the Office for Aging through its Leisure booklet or on its website. It also highlights particular issues which may be barriers to participation in recreational activities. The report also points out that while there are many opportunities to volunteer in the County, available statistical data suggest that there is a vast pool of untapped potential senior volunteers.

Various issues are identified for both Recreation and Volunteerism for seniors, and recommendations for action in the coming years are listed.

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LEISURE AND VOLUNTEERISM Task Force

I. Introduction

The Cornell University Retirement and Well Being Study (1996) conducted by Phyllis Moen, Professor of Life Course Studies and Sociology reports that upon retirement productive activity is crucial for both physical and psychological well being. Other research projects have also shown that lack of social involvement is one of the strongest indicators of poor physical and mental health in older people.

With the possibility of 30 years or more of retirement, workers are being encouraged to plan ahead for the years that they will spend out of the work force. This requires not only financial planning, but planning how time can be productively and beneficially used. Productive activity can take many forms. Two primary forms of activity for many retirees are recreation and volunteer work which are the foci of this report.

Looking to the future, the baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) will undoubtedly approach their retirement with a very different mind set than those of their parents. In seven years the first of the baby boomers will be turning 60. Attempts to lump them into the “mature” let alone “senior citizens” category will probably fail. A larger number of these baby boomer retirees will have participated more in sports and regular exercise than previous generations. They will also have traveled more, both at home and abroad, be more familiar with new technology and according to Susan Combs Ficke, an Aging and Health Communications Consultant, “will want to keep learning”. (Networks; National Council on Aging. March/April 1999)

Recreation is defined in this report as activities engaged in during unobligated time which generally promotes positive self-outcomes. Recreation generally falls into the following categories:

1. Fitness
2. Socialization
3. Expressive Arts (painting, ceramics, creative writing etc.)

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4. Performing Arts (dance, music, drama etc.)
5. Nature/Outdoor (camping, gardening, bird watching etc.)
6. Travel
7. Educational Opportunities
8. Sports/Games

Tompkins County is rich in opportunities for participation in all of the above recreational categories. However, there is no single location where Seniors can learn about recreational opportunities which are older adult specific, or which may have special appeal to older people. The County Office for the Aging puts out a leisure booklet which lists recreational activities available to senior citizens; this booklet can be accessed on the web. It is questionable, however, whether seniors would look to the Office for the Aging for information on leisure activities. Outside the Office for the Aging, general information on recreation opportunities must be gleaned from a number of sources. Upon retirement it takes persistence and ingenuity to discover some of the meaningful activities available to fill ones time.

Finding recreational activities may be additionally challenging to disabled seniors. Transportation and accessibility pose difficulties to many individuals. Additionally, many seniors who have mobility and other problems associated with aging do not see themselves as disabled, therefore they may be unaware of the special accommodations organizations are required to make so that they can fully participate. Seniors may also be unaware of ADA transportation services.

II. Status of Recreation for Seniors in Tompkins County

A. Fitness

Society's growing awareness of the importance of keeping fit has had an impact upon the number of older adults interested in taking part in organized fitness programs. Taking it easy in retirement is now seen as detrimental to ones health. The local response to this has been a growth in the number of fitness programs designed for

older adults. The YMCA, City Health Club, Courtside Health Club, Senior Center, Ithaca Fitness Center, Ithaca College, TC3, the Cayuga Medical Center and Cornell University have instituted exercise programs specifically designed for older people. As more and more research shows the benefits of exercise even into our seventh, eighth and ninth decades, the number of seniors regularly participating in health and wellness activities has increased. However, there continues to be a large segment of the over 60 population who are not regularly exercising or exercising strenuously enough to impact their health positively. The 1995 County Office For The Aging Needs Assessment shows that survey respondents reported spending the most time in sedentary activities such as reading, listening to the radio, or watching T.V.

B. Socialization

One of the major differences between retirees and non-retirees is the socialization offered by the work place. Seniors who may not have developed social networks outside of the workplace may have the most difficulty upon retirement in finding opportunities to socialize. As one ages, the number of opportunities for social interaction may diminish due to the death of friends and family, poor health, and an inability to drive. Social isolation is correlated with declining physical and mental health.

COFA's 1995 needs assessment indicated that 82% of those surveyed said they spend a lot or some time socializing with friends. However, 19% of those interviewed had no contact in person with anyone in the past week. Another 22% said they had one contact in the past week. The Pathways study being conducted by Cornell University and Ithaca College reports that those surveyed say that family, friends and leisure activities provide the most satisfaction in their lives.

Senior Center and Senior Citizen Units offer opportunities for socializing with cohorts as do retiree associations and senior citizen housing. The Senior Center accommodates and welcomes all seniors regardless of their physical status. The only restriction is that individuals suffering from dementia or other cognitive problems, or

who have severe physical problems be accompanied by a caregiver.

Places of worship, contact with family members and friends, and volunteering are other regular forms of socialization enjoyed by retirees. The Office for the Aging offers a Friendly Visitor program where volunteers are matched with homebound seniors to provide weekly contact and socialization. In 1998, the Friendly Visitor program provided service to 128 unduplicated clients.

C. Expressive and Performing Arts

When attending arts performances the number of older adults in the audiences is most noticeable. The presence of Cornell University and Ithaca College provide residents of Tompkins County with a rich array of opportunities to enjoy expressive and performing arts, as do non-profit groups such as The Kitchen Theater and the Hangar Theater. The City of Ithaca offers evening concerts once a week on the Commons during the summer and many seniors attend.

Private arts groups offer opportunities for participation in dance, music, painting, drama etc. Most of these opportunities are intergenerational in nature and some require a substantial fee. Some seniors report that they have experienced ageism within certain arts activities and have felt uncomfortable participating. However, music groups such as the Ageless Jazz Band and the Community Band have many members who are over 60 years of age.

The Senior Center offers instruction to individuals aged 55 and older in watercolor painting, clay, music and dance. Fees are kept as low as possible in order to enable all senior citizens, regardless of their financial situation, to participate.

D. Outdoor/Nature/Sports

There are outdoor activities available for all age groups through the Cayuga Nature Center, Cornell Outdoor Club, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Cooperative Extension, Senior Citizens' Council and N.Y. State Parks. Many senior citizens are avid skiers and take full advantage of local ski facilities, both downhill and cross-country.

Swimming is a popular and therapeutic activity which many seniors enjoy. The YMCA offers an arthritis swim program as well as other swimming opportunities. TC3 also offers an aquatic program for older adults. Through the Senior Citizens' Council, Borg Warner offers passes to people age 60 and older for the use of their pool on Warren Road during the summer months. There are also a variety of outdoor/nature groups who focus on hiking biking, canoeing etc.

Bowling and golf leagues exist throughout the County. Some are age integrated and some are for senior citizens. A Women's Social Golf Program is sponsored by the Senior Citizens' Council which offers women an opportunity to play non-competitive golf. A senior citizen men's softball team was active for several years, but due in part to lack of organization and official sponsorship the team no longer exists.

E. Travel

Opportunities for group and individual travel both nationally and internationally abound through local travel agents, membership groups, and the Senior Citizens' Council. Nationally AARP and Elderhostel offer a host of travel opportunities. The Senior Center, Swarthout Travel, GIAC and the Salvation Army offer one-day travel opportunities.

F. Educational Opportunities

Ithaca College, Cornell University and TC3 offer special learning opportunities for those age 60 and older. Cornell University has a Senior Citizens' Program. Residents age 60 and over who do not wish to earn college credit can register for courses offered through the three, six and eight week sessions which do not apply to any special program. The cost is \$60 per credit hour.

Ithaca College offers Extramural Studies for all ages. Seniors can audit classes at \$58 per credit hour plus registration fees.

TC3 classes can be audited by seniors free of charge. However, seniors cannot register until the day before or the first day of class depending on space.

BOCES, the Community School of Music and Art, and school district adult education programs are available to all age groups. Fees range from \$10 to \$95 per course.

Elderhostel, a national and international program offers many wonderful learning opportunities throughout the USA and abroad.

The Senior Circuit, a new collaborative learning program sponsored by the Senior Citizens' Council offers 12 to 15 courses and four to six presentations each semester. Courses are taught by volunteers, the majority of whom are seniors. Also twenty to twenty four computer courses are offered each semester. Taught by volunteers and designed specifically for the older student these courses offer an opportunity for seniors to become computer literate and catch up with new technology. The annual fee to participate in all and any of the courses is currently \$50.

To those with computer access, the Internet offers opportunities for distance learning, consulting, teaching, and business opportunities.

III. Status of Senior Volunteerism in Tompkins County

There are many opportunities in Tompkins County to volunteer. The Cayuga Medical Center has a well developed and managed volunteer program. Cornell Retiree Volunteers in Service (CRVIS) provide Cornell Retirees with opportunities to volunteer in local schools. The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, a national program locally sponsored by the Senior Citizens' Council, links individuals 55 and older with non-profit agencies in need of volunteer help. Over a twelve-month period 411 RSVP volunteers provided 64,000 hours of service to 75 non-profit agencies. This does not reflect the many non-RSVP affiliated hours of volunteer service provided by seniors in a variety of community settings. Approximately 75% of RSVP volunteers are female and 25% are male. 16% are aged 55 to 64. 40% aged 65 to 74, and 37% age 75 to 84. 7% are aged 85 and older. 93% provide under 10 hours of volunteer service a week.

The County Office for the Aging's 1995 Needs Assessment Survey shows that

36% of the respondents indicated they spend a lot or some time volunteering. 67% indicated that they had spent hardly any time volunteering in the past month, 22% had spent between 1 and 9 hours, and 9% had spent 10 or more hours. These statistics indicate that there is a vast pool of untapped potential senior volunteers in Tompkins County. It also shows that females are more likely to volunteer than males. This is in part due to the fact that the life span of males is shorter and that females are more likely to be single. Volunteering frequently helps to fill the void left by the loss of a spouse.

Life circumstances for baby boomers are very different from those of their parents. Success in recruiting volunteers from the next generation will depend on creating programs that realistically take these life circumstances into account. It is quite likely that upon reaching retirement age baby boomers will find themselves helping their children, and possibly grandchildren, while also helping one or both parents. Also the baby boomers will bring work place practices to their volunteer service and expect professional treatment from volunteer managers.

At the congressional level it has been suggested that one approach to the increasing number of retirees include the formation of an Experience Corps which compensates seniors for dealing with today's problems like literacy. This is a semi-volunteer approach to meeting community needs which could be expanded to include "key" volunteer positions where retirees could be compensated with benefits such as Medigap insurance or Long Term Care Insurance rather than straight cash.

IV. Issues, Needs & Highlights

A. There is no single location other than the Office for the Aging where seniors can learn about recreational opportunities which are older adult specific, or which may have special appeal to older people. Otherwise, general information on recreation opportunities must be gleaned from a number of sources.

B. One of the reasons seniors do not regularly participate in fitness activities is the lack of availability and accessibility. All of the organized programs are located in

and around the City of Ithaca. Older residents residing in other parts of the County must travel in order to take part in organized fitness activities. This becomes difficult during winter months and may be physically prohibitive for those who do not drive. Also, costs may be an issue for some seniors. As illustrated by the Senior Citizens' Council's walking program, taking an activity into the outlying areas can provide Senior Citizens with the opportunities they have been looking for to establish a regular fitness program. It has been shown that group activities provide many with the motivation needed to begin and maintain a regular fitness program.

C. Social isolation may be problematic for seniors who are homebound or who live in rural areas.

D. Some seniors find attending evening events difficult due to the fact they do not like to drive at night, or may no longer drive at all.

E. Activities which are not age-specific frequently do not accommodate the physical abilities of older adults. There appears to be a lack of opportunities for senior citizens to participate in organized team sports.

F. More seniors are riding bikes but feel unsafe riding on highways.

G. Getting away for even a day can be psychologically beneficial, but for many senior citizens the cost of taking a one-day trip is prohibitive.

H. Many seniors are unaware of the opportunities to audit classes at local colleges. Those who are aware may be reluctant to face the challenge of parking on campus.

I. Compared to some other communities, Tompkins County is lacking in

intergenerational programs where seniors help youth. CRVIS (Cornell Retiree Volunteers In Service) is doing an excellent job of taking science into schools. RSVP has some volunteers working in schools and the Headstart program, but there is a need for more help. There is potential for seniors to play an important role in helping the next generation to become contributing citizens.

J. Seniors with disabilities who wish to volunteer have fewer opportunities to do so. RSVP does its best to accommodate those with special needs offering volunteer activities that can be done at home such as telephoning, making lap robes, small mailings etc. More needs to be done in this area.

K. Many seniors who have mobility and other problems associated with aging do not see themselves as disabled. Therefore they may be unaware of the special accommodations organizations are required to make so that they can fully participate. They may also be unaware of ADA transportation services.

V. Action Recommendations

It is recommended:

A. THAT the possibility of developing a customer friendly clearinghouse be researched in order that senior citizens can learn about recreational and volunteer opportunities in Tompkins County. This could be a web site with links to other aging services and the Chamber of Commerce. It might also be possible to develop links with AARP and the National Council on the Aging providing local retirees with a national perspective of what is available. For senior citizens who do not have access to computer technology, a telephone number could be made available and print outs of the information could be picked up or mailed. In order to

keep the information current, especially for up-coming activities and performances, it would require a staff person to collect and update the information on a regular basis. Researching the feasibility of this would need to include funding sources.

- B.** THAT community awareness of ADAparatransit services be increased, especially among seniors who are potentially eligible.
- C.** THAT funders be made aware of the importance of supporting programs that help to prevent or at the very least delay the need for intensive/expensive health related interventions.
- D.** THAT start-up funding be sought to take fitness programs out into the County. An increase in the N.Y. State Congregate Initiative grant and/or funding from the N.Y. State Health Department would be helpful in promoting this recommendation. Locating fitness programs at sites where Senior Citizen Units meet would make them easily accessible. Senior housing is another ideal location for promoting exercise (some do offer exercise programs). If funding were available discussions with resident councils and housing management should be pursued. Building socialization and camaraderie into fitness programs can increase the overall benefit.
- E.** THAT a collaborative effort between a health care provider and the Senior Center be made to research the possibility of funding a fitness program targeted to the frail elderly. In Seattle, Washington, a model program in 30 senior centers has shown that fitness programs focused on frail elderly have improved their physical and emotional condition while cutting down health care spending (Aging News Alert, April 20, 1999).

The fitness program would focus on older people who have chronic health problems which make them more vulnerable to frequent hospitalizations. The longer one lives the greater the chance that one will have to cope with a chronic health problem. With the continuing increase in the number of people aged 85 and older, a wellness program which focuses on coping with chronic health problems could be very beneficial both physically and financially.

- F.** THAT opportunities to socialize through the Senior Center, Senior Citizen Units, Foodnet, RSVP and COFA's Friendly Visitor Program are maintained as the senior population increases. Agencies should be prepared for the fact that new retirees may bring about change to the format and the type of socialization, but the basic human need for contact with others will remain the same.
- G.** THAT the possibility of a new service be explored which would help homebound seniors interested in using a computer obtain and install hardware and software and receive tutoring on its use. Researching how much interest there would be in such a program should be made through notices in the Senior Circle, on the radio and through newspapers. If the response is sufficient a proposal should be written and submitted to a private foundation for possible funding. Although the importance of personal face to face interaction must not be negated, the use of computers for interaction between seniors and others could help to relieve isolation for those who are homebound or who have difficulty getting out due to lack of transportation.
- H.** THAT efforts be made to collaborate with the performing arts groups to provide transportation for senior citizens who wish to attend evening

performances but do not wish or are unable to drive. This should be a fee-based service. Also matinee performances should be encouraged as an alternative to evening-only opportunities.

- I.** THAT efforts be made to encourage arts groups to include older adults as potential participants in their programs and to consider offering scholarships (when available) to both young and old. With the aging of the population, ageism may become less of an issue in many areas.
- J.** THAT existing organizations offering nature/outdoor activities be encouraged to consider the needs and interests of older adults so that senior citizens can be fully integrated into existing activities. These organizations should also consider developing age specific programs for seniors. Baby boomers who are now involved in outdoor activities will probably continue to pursue them into their retirement years and as the groups they are involved with age, the activities will naturally accommodate their physical abilities.
- K.** THAT aging service agencies offer support to groups advocating bicycle trails and help promote safe bike riding areas.
- L.** THAT the Youth Bureau, which is the recipient of State Parks and Recreation funds earmarked for activities for all ages, be approached and asked to consider the possibility of sponsoring and organizing team sports for older adults.
- M.** THAT consideration be given to subsidizing one or two trips a year for individuals who are at or near the poverty level. This would entail seeking a source of funding, and establishing eligibility criteria.

- N.** THAT information about college campus opportunities be incorporated in the clearinghouse recommended in Part V Section A. Cornell, Ithaca College and TC3 should be approached as to whether they would be willing to offer courses off campus at a location more easily accessed by senior citizens living in the community.
- O.** THAT a computer literate volunteer be recruited to research opportunities for seniors on the Internet and provide information in the Senior Circle and on Senior Time radio program, and through web pages.
- P.** THAT employers be encouraged to provide flex time or time-off for employees who wish to volunteer, in order to help employees transition to retirement and to begin developing an increased pool of volunteers. Employers should also be encouraged to recognize the volunteer work of their employees in newsletters, through special awards etc. It should be suggested to employers that part of an early retirement incentive could include community service, i.e., half time work, quarter time community service. Volunteer information should be included in retiree packages.
- Q.** THAT agencies seeking volunteers be educated to the fact that new retirees have specific and sophisticated skills which they are ready to use in volunteer service. Frequently it is difficult to match these skills with volunteer job opportunities. This problem could be alleviated by reverse recruitment, i.e., RSVP could let the agencies know what volunteer skills are available.
- R.** THAT efforts be focused on developing strong intergenerational

programs whereby the skills of senior volunteers are used to help encourage and support young people as well as provide positive role models. Some school districts are reluctant to utilize volunteers who will need training and orientation because this takes time out of teachers already crowded daily schedules. It may require educating the educators as to the value of senior volunteers, and helping school districts develop volunteer utilization and management skills. Work on bridging the generation gap (perceived and real) must also be a part of any intergenerational program development. There are many intergenerational volunteer programs being successfully operated in other communities.

- S.** THAT local agencies who utilize volunteers monitor developing possibilities of volunteer opportunities in cyberspace. These would provide homebound individuals, and others whose busy lives may negate their participating in on-site volunteer work, with easy access to volunteer tasks whenever it is convenient.

- T.** THAT efforts be focused on providing more volunteer opportunities for disabled seniors.

VI. Conclusion

The importance of leisure activities and volunteer opportunities to the health and welfare of older adults must be considered a high priority when planning for the future. Research continues to show that we can help to positively shape the aging process. Every effort must be made to encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own health and wellness in later life and opportunities must be made available to help them do this. The improvement in the quality of life and the savings in health care and long term care costs will ultimately benefit everyone.