

HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH–METLIFE FOUNDATION INITIATIVE ON
RETIREMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Center for Health Communication • Harvard School of Public Health
677 Huntington Avenue • Boston, MA 02115 • 617.432.1038

EMBARGOED UNTIL JUNE 15, 2004

Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement

A Report from

**Harvard School of Public Health–MetLife Foundation Initiative
on Retirement and Civic Engagement**

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Approximately 77 million babies were born in the United States during the boom years of 1946 to 1964. In 2011, the oldest will turn 65, and, on average, can expect to live to 83. Many will continue well into their 90s.

The baby boomers soon will have the opportunity to redefine the meaning and purpose of the older years. As some of the demands of work and family that have commanded their attention in mid-life recede, boomers will have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by actively participating in the life of their communities.

But will they participate? Compared to their parents' generation, the so-called "Greatest Generation," boomers have done less by every measure of civic engagement, including rates of voting and joining community groups. Given this reality, *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, a report from the Harvard School of Public Health–MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement, examines these questions:

- Can a national effort succeed in mobilizing large numbers of boomers to contribute their time, skills, and experience to address community problems?
- If boomers respond in large numbers, will civic organizations of various kinds be prepared to receive them?
- What roles can the news media, the advertising industry, and Hollywood play in helping society redefine the meaning and purpose of the older years?

The main message of the Report is that there is an opportunity to help boomers create a social legacy of profound importance. Their added years of life give them the chance. Their experiences in life give them the capability. And the need to come to terms with the world in a way that brings integrity to their life gives them the psychological incentive. Much may depend on the actions of the first wave of boomers, many of whom, while inspired in their formative years by President Kennedy's call-to-service, have been notably less involved in civic life than their parents. This first wave may serve as role models for younger boomers, and for future generations as well.

The development of the Report was funded by a generous grant from MetLife Foundation as part of its grant-making program in aging and health.

The following are key observations from the Report:

The link between age and retirement is eroding.

The closing decades of the 20th century brought a reversal in what had been a long-term trend toward earlier retirement. Since the mid-1980s, workforce participation has increased slightly for older American men, and dramatically for older women, and the average age of retirement has risen. This reversal may be due, in part, to the strong economy of the late 1980s and 1990s. It may also reflect underlying structural changes that will likely have longer-lasting effects, including the end of mandatory retirement, the decline in defined benefit retirement plans, changes to Social Security that eliminate disincentives to remain in the labor force, changes in the occupational mix, technological advancements, and improvements in the health and longevity of older Americans.

Instead of retiring en masse in their late 50s or early 60s, boomers are more likely to continue working longer, and to move gradually towards complete retirement. The year 2011, when the first boomers reach 65, may be less of a watershed than anticipated if the connection between age and retirement continues to erode.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, more people volunteer in mid-life than in retirement.

Conventional wisdom holds that individuals volunteer in greater numbers and with greater frequency after they retire, when they have time on their hands. This is only partially correct. As a general rule, the percentage of people who volunteer reaches a peak in mid-life—not in retirement—and then gradually declines. Volunteering in this peak period is associated with having more, rather than fewer, obligations and commitments. On the other hand, individuals who do volunteer during their early years of retirement do so with greater frequency than mid-life volunteers. Indeed, boomers' parents show an additional peak of volunteer activity in their 70s, although this late peak was not observed in the preceding generation and may reflect the Greatest Generation's exceptional civic behavior.

Large-scale efforts may be needed to recruit boomers as volunteers.

Given that boomers have been far less civically engaged than the Greatest Generation at every stage to date, it is not clear to what extent they will fill their parents' shoes through volunteer activity in their retirement years. Although close to one-third of boomers say they expect to participate in community service after retirement, there is a difference between intentions and actions, and boomers may need a push.

A national campaign—on a scale not previously attempted—might very well succeed in mobilizing boomers to act on their stated intentions. Such a campaign, comparable to the National Designated Driver Campaign of the late 1980s, could have a big impact by stimulating a public dialogue about the meaning and purpose of the later years, working with the entertainment and advertising industries to rethink images of aging, and encouraging journalists to cover aging in new ways.

Productive aging will require careful planning by individual boomers.

When psychologist Erik Erikson delineated his concept of the life cycle, he saw the final stage, commencing in one's 60s, as a retrospective undertaking toward the end of life. Erikson later revisited his earlier work to take into account the new demographics, and warned against "an initial retirement holiday followed by a dangling and unproductive aging of many years' duration." Erikson and colleagues urged those in their 50s to develop plans to meet the challenge "squarely," advocating "clear insight' into how the elders in our present society can become more integral coworkers in community life." An organized effort could help boomers envision, and plan for, a life that achieves meaning in their later years by connecting in new ways to the larger community around them.

The current language of aging is obsolete and may be an impediment to change.

Words like "work," "retirement," "volunteer," and all of the language related to aging (e.g., "seniors") oversimplify a complex reality, and may serve as barriers to change. To combat the negative image of the frail, dependent elder that underpins a grim view of the future, society may have too willingly embraced the contrasting image of the "active senior"—indefatigable, healthy, usually wealthy, and eternally young. Both images have limitations. New language, imagery, and stories are needed to help boomers and the general public re-envision the role and value of elders and the meaning and purpose of one's later years. The entertainment industry, given its role in storytelling across the social spectrum, may be the most promising vehicle for conveying alternative images of aging and portraying individuals of all ages participating in community life. In addition, the advertising industry can play a key role by offering alternatives to the narrow set of existing images that reflect current social attitudes toward aging.

Organizations may need retooling to attract and retain boomer volunteers.

Existing voluntary or charitable institutions may need to be revamped to absorb boomer volunteers and take account of their interests and preferences. Many local agencies will not have

the resources for professional volunteer management, so new mediating institutions, or third parties, may be needed to handle recruitment, training, and referral of boomers.

National nonprofit organizations in public health, social services, youth development, aging, and education should take the lead in helping local affiliates identify and develop volunteer opportunities to obtain services they otherwise would not be able to afford. Planning should take into account that individuals from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences can fill a variety of useful roles.

A wide range of volunteer opportunities will be needed.

Organizations that utilize volunteers should offer a broad set of options that allow people to engage in different ways at different times and at different levels of commitment. These options should range from one-time or episodic opportunities that enable boomers to test the waters and shop around to sustained and intensive commitments.

Intergenerational programs deserve special attention.

Community-based initiatives that bridge the generations should receive special attention. These programs build community by integrating the old with the young, transmitting knowledge and experience to future generations and re-enforcing the value of people of all ages. Studies have found that young people in such programs show measurable improvements in school attendance, attitudes toward school and the future, and attitudes toward elders. Adult volunteers report substantial benefits to themselves: the satisfaction of sharing their experience, feeling useful, and giving back to the community.

Communities should develop plans to involve boomer volunteers in tackling important local problems.

Towns and cities should consider organizing large-scale, volunteer-based efforts that reach out to various sectors of their community in an inclusive way to identify and respond to the community's most pressing problems. The success of such efforts—involving individuals of all ages—is likely to depend on a leadership cadre of volunteers who are prepared to make it their principal activity. Once initiatives are designed with broad input, leaders can offer other volunteers a continuum of opportunities for involvement, ranging from episodic to regular and from casual to intensive.

Informal volunteering and “helping” should be valued and encouraged.

Some boomers may prefer opportunities for civic engagement that do not involve working through an agency. These individuals include self-starters who, when they see a need, do something about it, perhaps organizing friends and neighbors to work with them. Social engagement also includes the kind of informal neighbor-to-neighbor helping that is common in many communities. Informal initiatives should be encouraged as valued alternatives to agency-based volunteer service.

Background

The **Center for Health Communication of the Harvard School of Public Health** has created a series of national media campaigns to promote the adoption of healthy behaviors. The Center's National Designated Driver Campaign demonstrated how a new social concept—the designated driver—could be rapidly introduced through mass communication, promoting widespread adoption of a social norm that the driver does not drink. The Center's Harvard Mentoring Project, a national media campaign conducted in collaboration with leading media companies and nonprofit organizations, recruits volunteer mentors for at-risk youth. The Center is planning a national campaign to change public attitudes toward aging and motivate boomers and retirees to engage in community service. More information about the Center is available at www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc.

MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its longstanding tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. Grants support health, education, and civic and cultural programs throughout the United States. In the area of aging, the Foundation funds programs that promote mental fitness, encourage civic involvement, and create public awareness of health issues such as Alzheimer's disease. Recent civic-engagement projects include the *National Council on Aging Wisdom Works Initiative*, which is designed to increase civic engagement by older people working in volunteer teams to address community needs and the *MetLife Foundation Older Adults Enrich America Community Awards*, which celebrate the accomplishments of volunteers age 55 and older. To help nonprofit organizations understand the characteristics and motivations of volunteers, MetLife Foundation sponsored the *Giving and Volunteering* survey series of the Independent Sector, including four special reports on older adults. For more information about the Foundation, please visit the Web site at www.metlife.org.

Contact:

Terri Mendoza
617.432.1038
tmendoza@hsph.harvard.edu

Caroline Campanelli
212.578.6675
ccampanelli@metlife.com