

IN DEMAND: AGING BABY BOOMERS AND SENIORS ARE SOUGHT AFTER AS VOLUNTEERS

By Yona Rogosin

Corporations are not the only organizations valuing the use of aging baby boomers and seniors in the workforce. Nonprofits are courting the 50 plus crowd too.

At the seminar “Volunteering Is Ageless” sponsored by the Volunteer Referral Center (VRC), New York City, and the Manhattan-based Health Advocates for Older People (HAFOP), a hearty group of aging boomers and seniors braved the Nor’easter Athena that hit the City on November 7 to listen to a panel of executives from New York nonprofits explain why their demographic is valued as volunteers and how they can help.

Using their agency, Health Advocates for Older People, as an example, Nancy Houghton, Executive Director, and Kate Fischer, Volunteer Coordinator of Volunteer and Pet Programs, emphasized the sense of family and community older volunteers bring to their constituency of older adults, many of whom have lost their family and friends. The home visits and telephone calls and organized group activities, such as exercise and home safety classes, lectures, and museum visits, provide volunteers and clients alike with a healthy dose of caring and appreciation, they said.

Barry Schechter of the New York Foundation for Senior Citizens Ombudsman Program for Long Term Care pointed out that seniors make very effective advocates for his program. Many have gone through the experience of having parents in nursing homes and understand the concerns and issues that both residents and their families have, such as food quality, lost laundry, hoarding and staff attitudes.

“Seniors give our program credibility. You are the people whom our agency serves,” said Maril Ortiz, Special Projects Coordinator for Senior Planet Digital, a division of Older

Adults Technology Services (OATS). Unveiling her agency's plans for the new Exploration Center in Chelsea that will open in December offering a state-of-the-art technology center, library, classes and special events for older adults, she explained that, just as seniors learn technology differently than young people do, they respond well to peer-to-peer contact. "The presence of older volunteers will ensure a warm and welcoming environment for Center members," she added.

But the benefits of volunteering are not one-sided. According to Robert Price, VRC Board member and panel moderator, studies show that volunteering keeps seniors and aging baby boomers feeling vital, socially connected and challenged. He also has firsthand experience since he interviews potential volunteers at the VRC and maintains follow up communication with them and the agencies in which they are placed.

He expects that nonprofits' interest in the older volunteer will increase, given the rise in the pool of potential volunteers who are over age 50 and the number who do volunteer. For example, the percentage of volunteers age 51 and up who were interviewed by VRC from January through July doubled from 2009 to 2012, from 16% to 31.5%. Nationwide, the number of volunteers over age 65 for the 12 month period ending September 2011 was 9.5 million.

Another benefit older volunteers bring was pointed out by Craig Bannister, Volunteer and Intern Coordinator for the All Stars Project, an award winning, city-wide program that promotes development of inner city youth through an innovative model of performance learning using experimental theater. He stressed that seniors strengthen the diversity of the agency's program as well as provide valuable skill sets and role models for

its leadership and communications training and supplemental education program.

A similar point was made by Rebecca Marriott, Director of Education and Vocational Services of the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter. She explained that seniors challenge the stereotype of adults that her program's clients have. "It is so gratifying to watch seniors break down the barriers our clients have built up from years of abuse and poverty and develop positive relationships and trust with them," she said.

Throughout the program, the panelists made reference to the people skills, good judgment and maturity that older volunteers have acquired and use in their work to the advantage of their agencies and their clients.

Also covered were the many ways volunteers are used - from helping with recreational activities, workshops, dinner and fundraising programs; to acting as advocates, tutors, and mentors; to being receptionists, greeters, escorts, friendly visitors, or referral sources. The panelists agreed that older volunteers are finding meaningful experiences as volunteers in these positions and many others.

"Deciding what to do boils down to your own interests and the time you have available. The choice is yours." advised Pat Girardi, Executive Director of the VRC. She suggested that attendees call the Center at 212-889-4805 to make an appointment or visit its website at www.volunteer-referral.org for further information.

The VRC interviews potential volunteers Monday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Tuesday evening, from 5 to 8 p.m. at its offices at 161 Madison Ave.

The November 7 program of "Volunteering Is Ageless" is the second time VRC and HAFOP have offered the seminar. Because it has generated so much interest from

boomers and seniors as well as from nonprofits, more programs will be presented next year.

A nonprofit itself , VRC has almost 25 years of experience referring New Yorkers to volunteer work at no charge. Its personal, one-on-one assistance and partnerships with nonprofits has helped thousands of New Yorkers find volunteer positions. It also provides supportive services such as interviewing skills workshops for potential volunteers.

Health Advocates for Older People, promotes healthy aging through wellness programs and serves an increasing frail elderly population primarily in Yorkville, East Harlem, the Upper East and West Sides and Queens. For further information about its programs, call 212-980-1700 or go to its website www.hafop.org.

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