

2005 White House Conference on Aging Listening Session

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Statement submitted by:

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I would like to thank the Policy Committee for the opportunity to speak here today and for its recognition of civic engagement as a “key issue area” for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

With the baby boom generation on the verge of retirement, there is an increasing awareness that older adults are a growing —and largely untapped— civic resource for responding to societal needs through both paid and unpaid work.

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and its policy institute, The National Academy on an Aging Society, recently launched a 5-year initiative funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies to stimulate research leading to the development of programs and policies that will increase civic participation among older adults.

Our project reflects a growing awareness among government, nonprofit, for-profit, and policy leaders that older Americans' contributions to civic life will be vital in determining how America meets the challenges of an aging society in the decades ahead.

An aging society faces a dual challenge: to support its frail or impoverished older citizens and to provide opportunities to the majority of older citizens who are both able and willing to serve. The aging of the baby boom generation could provide a windfall for civic life in the 21st century by greatly increasing the number of people available to address critical family caregiving, education, and elder and child care needs in American communities.

In fact, several trends suggest we might anticipate an increase in civic engagement as the baby boomers move into retirement. The next generation of retirees will be the healthiest, longest-lived, best educated, and most affluent in history. In a 1999 national survey, more than a third of the next generation of retirees said that "volunteering or being involved in community service" would be a "very important" part of their retirement.

But will baby boomers, who, according to some studies, have volunteered less, voted less, and been less engaged in civic activities than their parents' generation, participate more as they get older? What impact will later retirement and new work options, such as flexible schedules, retraining, and "bridge jobs" have on civic roles? What effect will the increased economic, racial, and ethnic heterogeneity of the baby boom generation have on civic participation? How will the increased participation of women in the paid labor force affect civic engagement?

If baby boomers choose to actively participate in their communities in retirement, will nonprofit, business, and public organizations be able to engage the talents and experience of the baby boom generation—and satisfy their demand for a wider range of community service opportunities, “episodic” engagement, “critical mission” roles, and options for both paid and unpaid volunteerism? Early evidence suggests an alarming mismatch between the skills, time commitments, and interests of the boomers and available opportunities, both paid and unpaid. Volunteers are usually assigned to marginal roles, with little management oversight or responsibility. A recent survey of nonprofit organizations found virtually no long-term plans to recruit or retain older workers or volunteers.

Are the nation’s service programs, including Senior Corps, USA Freedom Corps, and AmeriCorps prepared to take advantage of the best-educated, healthiest, most active group of older Americans in history? Currently, less than 9 percent of AmeriCorps 50,000 volunteers are over 50. What lessons can be learned from current initiatives in the private sector, such as Deloitte Consulting’s “Senior Leaders” program, or innovative public-private partnerships such as Civic Ventures’ Experience Corps?

Although the potential exists for a new era of civic engagement in America, there are clearly many unanswered questions. Researchers and policymakers are only beginning to consider how the pieces fit together. A research base is essential to help properly frame the issue—a critical first step to developing effective programs and policies that will increase civic participation among older adults.

In response to these urgent issues, GSA and the Academy are bringing together experts from the areas of research, policy, and practice to synthesize the current state of knowledge about civic engagement for a set of projects and activities that will (1) promote the development of civic engagement research within the gerontological community; and (2) translate and communicate the results of that research to the policy and programs communities.

One of the first activities of our “Civic Engagement in an Older America” project is a series of focus groups and forums to help inform the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. We plan to conduct 12 focus groups and four forums in both urban and rural communities across America to obtain the views of a diverse group of experts and citizens on the issues of civic engagement. In 1995, GSA conducted similar forums and focus groups that helped shape the White House Conference on Aging agenda and became part of the official final report.

Our focus groups will explore working baby boomers and retired older Americans’ knowledge of issues around civic engagement, their own civic participation, and their thoughts on barriers and possible avenues to expand civic engagement. Our forums will obtain input from a diverse group of professionals and stakeholders, including researchers, government officials, corporate leaders, and representatives from the community. They will be asked to address a range of issues, including definitions of

civic engagement, opportunities and challenges for civic participation, and to identify model programs.

These activities are scheduled to occur in early 2005 and we invite the Committee and its staff to provide input on the content of these sessions and to participate in them. We also would welcome an opportunity to have these forums sanctioned as an official White House Conference on Aging activity.

Currently, much of the public discussion about an aging society focuses on how to finance Social Security and Medicare to meet the health and retirement needs of older Americans in the future. The importance of these issues cannot be underestimated. However, we should not overlook the growing civic resource that this better educated, healthier, and more active generation of older Americans represents. It is reassuring to know that the White House Conference on Aging recognizes the unprecedented opportunity present in an older America.

Thank you again for your invitation and commitment to this important and timely issue. GSA and the Academy look forward to working with you during what looks to be an exciting year.