

SEPTEMBER 11TH: THE INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSE

For more than 35 years, intergenerational programs have connected the young and old. In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11th, the role older people play or can play in the lives of children and youth takes on new meaning. Under difficult circumstances, elders can be “time witnesses” offering continuity, comfort, and calm. They can provide emotional support, extra attention, and offer a historical perspective that helps those younger develop the awareness, self-confidence and coping skills needed to overcome horrendous experiences and obstacles. They have experienced life changing events and periods of threat from abroad. Their stories of triumph and survival can provide hope and perspective to current events. The presence of older adults in schools and communities reassures children that there are caring adults in their lives. Older adults can promote cultural exchange and understanding by sharing cultural traditions and values. Older people gain a sense of purpose from the exchange, which helps them feel connected to their community and of service to their country in troubled times.

Older adults are an under tapped resource in our communities. They are living longer, increasing in numbers, and are generally healthier than ever before. By 2020 individuals over age 50 will constitute more than 1/3 of the population.¹ Eighty-three percent of adults over age 55 report that volunteering and community service plays or will play a role in their plans for retirement. Volunteering and community service rank high in importance to older adults, only behind travel.² As America learns to cope and move on, our elders have important and unique roles to play in helping our country heal.

EXISTING INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM MODELS:

Intergenerational programs purposefully bring together old and young in ongoing, mutually beneficial, planned activities designed to achieve specified program goals. Through intergenerational programs, people of all ages share their talents and resources, supporting each other in relationships that benefit both the individuals and the community.

Following is a sample of model intergenerational programs that can be adapted to strengthen communities and support children, youth, and older adults in the wake of September 11th.

Dialogues Across the Ages: This program of Interages in Montgomery County, Maryland creates the opportunity for older adults and high school students to engage in cross-age discussions involving various social studies topics that are of interest to both groups. Up to fifteen older adults join a high school class for eight once-a-week sessions under the guidance of the classroom teacher.

City of Seattle Intergenerational Dialogue Project: This project of the Mayor’s Office for Senior Citizens and Intergenerational Innovations in Seattle, Washington brings older adults from the community into local schools to share their experiences, wisdom, and expertise with children and youth. The dialogue is a dynamic discussion where elders and youth come together to listen, exchange, and focus on issues that support classroom curriculum and learning. Topics are based on the needs of the schools and have included: Homelessness in Seattle, the Culture of India, Surviving Polio, and American History Interviews.

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Elders Share the Arts: Based in Brooklyn, New York, Elders Share the Arts conducts a number of workshops called “Generating Community” in partnership with school and senior centers. Old and young engage in a process of exploring each other’s stories and cultural backgrounds and of discovering commonalities across age and culture. Workshops generally meet once a week for 30 weeks. Stories are often transformed in to dramatic presentations or visual art.

“Pearls of Wisdom” is another project of Elders Share the Arts where elder storytellers transform personal experience and memories and share stories of struggle, triumph, passion and hope to a wide range of audiences including schools.

Time Witness: This project in Germany brings older adults, called time witnesses, into schools to talk about the Holocaust and their experiences. This reminiscence program helps to pass on human stories and living history to another generation.

EXISTING & PROPOSED FEDERAL PROGRAMS:

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

The Corporation for National and Community Service, through the National Senior Service Corps, administers programs that tap the experience and skills of seniors to help others. These programs engage more than a half million older Americans in service to their communities as volunteers or in exchange for a small stipend. CNCS, which is up for reauthorization, provides many avenues to promote the involvement of seniors in schools.

Foster Grandparent Program: Seniors volunteer their services to children and youth with special or exceptional needs. *This program could be adapted to serve children especially affected by the events of September 11th and the aftermath of the tragedies.*

Retired Senior Volunteer Program: Provides opportunities for people age 55 or older, to share their experiences, abilities, and skills to improve their communities and themselves. *Among other services, this program could provide opportunities for older adults to work with schools to give presentations, lead dialogues, or provide one on one discussions with students about the events and aftermath of September 11th.*

Demonstrations Programs: Opportunities for innovative programs that recognize seniors as a resource to the community. Successful demonstration programs have emerged, such as Experience Corps, which builds on the capacities of older adults and engages them in leadership in schools. *Through this program or other demonstration programs, experienced older adults could lead discussions in schools to process issues related to September 11th and its aftermath.*

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC): Authorized under Title X of the ESEA, the federal government provides grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers to provide

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out-of-school programs for children and residents of all ages within a local community. *These 21st CCLC can be venues for intergenerational before-school, after-school and summer programs that address issues related to September 11th and its aftermath.*

Seniors in Our Schools Act: The Seniors in Our Schools Act (H.R. 719) has been proposed by Congressmen Earnest Lee Fletcher (R-KY) and David Wu (D-OR). The bill would amend the ESEA of 1965 to ensure that senior citizens are given an opportunity to serve as mentors, tutors and volunteers for certain programs. *Among their volunteer activities, seniors could present, lead or participate in discussions about September 11th and its aftermath.*

AREAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:

The existing intergenerational models and federal programs provide a unique opportunity to support children, youth, and older adults in the wake of September 11th. An organized demonstration project and additional resources could mobilize older adults and bring the model intergenerational initiatives outlined above to communities across the country. An outreach campaign, including a toolkit and coordinated technical assistance, would help communities institute intergenerational responses based on their needs. In addition to the programs discussed, there are numerous intergenerational service-learning opportunities to be explored where young and old together can learn about issues and then take positive action. The intergenerational response to the tragic events of September 11th provides a new and different opportunity for intergenerational initiatives, older adult engagement, and community service that could be sustained for long-term positive outcomes for schools and communities.

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¹ AARP, 2001. Available: www.aarp.org

² Civic Ventures, The New Face of Retirement: Older Americans, Civic Engagement, and the Longevity Revolution, 1999. Available: www.civicventures.org