

Volunteers: Who Needs Them?

You Need them! By **Gloria Sokolowski**



As the echoes of the September 11 attacks were ringing our ears, President Bush issued a call to service in early 2002. Between then and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina four years later, Americans increased their volunteer activities in their communities significantly, from 59.5 million Americans volunteering in 2002 to 65.4 million in 2005.

The need for volunteers to strengthen their communities by volunteering goes back to the days when Ben Franklin established the first Fire House in Philadelphia. Volunteering to help someone else knows no politics. President Kennedy established the Peace Corps, President Johnson established the VISTA program, President Bush (41) established the Daily Points of Light, President Clinton started the AmeriCorps program and President Bush (43) created the USA Freedom Corps.

Today Americans are making more time to improve their community through service. In fact, people of all ages are volunteering on college campuses, through religious communities, at schools, and in social service organizations in a wide range of volunteer activities. Many volunteers teach and mentor children, help older individuals live independently, work with communities to recover from hurricanes and other disasters, assist in neighborhood watch programs, serve as victim advocates in the court system, etc, etc. The list goes on forever.

Baby boomers (persons born between 1946 and 1964) are the largest growing untapped natural resource we have

in this country. Today's retirees are much more skilled and can perform tasks which are integral to the operations of a public or non-profit agency. As they wind down their primary careers, millions of boomers are determined to apply their experience to make a difference for others. Neither young nor old, they represent an extraordinary pool of social and human capital.

Organizations – existing non-profits and for-profit companies as well as ventures yet to be formed – have an historic opportunity to tap this newly abundant resource to tackle social problems and enrich community life. Surveys show that most boomers want to continue working, part-time or full-time, through what were once considered the retirement years.

Being the most densely populated state in the country, New Jersey is home to largest number of 55+ communities in the country, second only to Florida.

Not utilizing this resource to better serve your community is as bad as doing nothing to protect our environment.

The number one reason people don't volunteer is because they were not asked. Ask someone to volunteer and change their life and that of someone in their community.

For more information on volunteering in the United States go to www.nationalservice.org.

Gloria Sokolowski is the State Program Director at the New Jersey State Office of the Corporation for National and Community Service.