

Encouraging Intergenerational Solidarity in the United States
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Introduction

As with other countries, the United States is in the midst of a major demographic change. We live in an aging society. The number of people over 60 is growing at an unprecedented rate and is expected to equal the number of people under 18 by 2030. Beginning in 2010, the first of the seventy-eight million baby boomers turned 65¹. The life span is increasing as advances in disease prevention, safety and other factors have added years to the middle of life. Yet the policies and programs to support and engage older adults have changed little.

At the same time the concept of traditional family and the roles of family members have evolved. The Center for American Progress found that in 2010, among families with children, 44.8 percent were headed by two working parents and another 26.1 percent were headed by a single parent. Less than one in three children now have a stay at home parent compared to more than half in 1975. While many women work because they want to, the increase correlates directly to the costs associated with maintaining a home and raising children. More often than not, it takes two incomes. While politicians talk about the importance of the family unit, the United States has some of the weakest family-leave policies in the developed world.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in multigenerational households including grandfamilies (families in which grandparents and other relatives raising children). Child welfare systems have been encouraged to and have strengthened their ability to locate kin when parents are unable to care for children and are removed from the home. While children have proven in general to fare better in relative care than foster care, the complex issues these families face can seem insurmountable.

With high rates of unemployment and home foreclosures, caregiving stresses on families, and increasing social challenges related to poverty, the age-old social compact that ties generations together is under major stress. The social compact is based on reciprocity and the belief that society progresses because of the investments past generations have made in carrying knowledge and culture forward. It recognizes that people of all generations —past, present and future—are bound together as a means to survive and thrive.

This paper will provide a brief overview of practices and community-wide efforts designed to strengthen intergenerational relationships in the United States.

Intergenerational Practice

Over the past 40 years, the concept of intentionally bringing generations together to serve as resources to each other and to their communities has become increasingly popular as a vehicle for addressing critical societal needs and strengthening cross-age relationships. Beginning with the Foster Grandparent and Retired Senior Volunteer Programs in the 1960's, early intergenerational programs focused primarily on dispelling age-related stereotypes, fostering cross-age understanding, reducing social isolation, and providing financial support for low-income elders.²

As concern about potential intergenerational conflict grew, Generations United was created in 1986 by leading child, youth and aging advocates. Generation United's mission is to foster national collaboration on public policy issues, promote intergenerational programming, and encourage efforts to build a cohesive, caring society

Throughout the 1980's and beyond, the focus of programs began shifting from reducing generational separation to addressing critical community concerns.³ Across the country, a variety of innovative programs were developed that brought youth and older adults together to tackle important social issues such as the environment, literacy/education, family support, elder/child care, health, positive youth development, and cross-cultural understanding. Since then, millions of *older adults* have served as tutors, mentors, health educators, career counselors, respite providers and in many other roles designed to improve the well-being of younger generations. *Young people* have taught technology skills, delivered meals on wheels, provided chore services to homebound elders, captured oral histories, and taught English to immigrant elders. *Together* they have addressed environmental issues, advocated for endangered species, acted as safety patrols in neighborhoods, captured ethnic and cultural traditions through the arts, and conducted health education campaigns.

The breadth and depth of intergenerational work has expanded in recent years. It includes structured programs, intergenerational shared sites, community-wide efforts and support services for grandfamilies.

Programs

Though the number of intergenerational programs has grown, few have been evaluated. One exception is Experience Corps (www.experiencecorps.org) which has benefited the field through extensive evaluation of the program's impact on the children and older adult

participants. Recently adopted by AARP, this national program is now known as AARP's Experience Corps. It engages people over 55 in improving early reading and literacy skills, has recruited over 2,000 members to tutor and mentor elementary school students, help teachers in the classroom, and lead after-school enrichment activities. Research conducted by Washington University in St. Louis and Johns Hopkins University shows that Experience Corps boosts student academic performance, helps schools and youth-serving organizations become more successful, and enhances the well-being of older adults in the process.

Another example is OASIS, a St. Louis Missouri based nonprofit whose mission is to promote successful aging through a three-fold approach: lifelong learning, healthy living and social engagement. Founded in 1982, the organization is now active in 40 cities across 24 states and serves more than 35,000 individuals each year. OASIS tutors have helped well over 400,000 children in the primary grades improve reading skills. Ninety percent of the students in the program show improved academic performance. A more recent addition, CATCH Healthy Habits, brings children and adults age 50+ together to learn good eating and physical activity habits for a lifetime. Early results show the children and older adults adopting healthier eating habits and increasing their physical activity.

Intergenerational programs have been successfully addressing critical issues such as immigration as well. Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders- www.projectshine.org) at Temple University's Intergenerational Center is an award-winning program that has mobilized over 9,000 college students since its inception in 1996. SHINE helps older immigrants in 18 communities throughout the country learn English and prepare for U.S. citizenship. With AmeriCorps funding, SHINE recently expanded its efforts to focus on enhancing the health literacy skills of immigrant and refugee elders.

To encourage quality intergenerational programs, Generations United worked with a group of leading scholars in the US to develop the "Programs of Distinction" award. Programs complete an intensive application which is then reviewed by experts in the field. Areas of review include addressing needs, training staff and volunteers, evaluation and modification, and engaging the community. If the program successfully completes the review process, the award is given and is valid for two years. More often programs report they learned what needs to be strengthened in their current program and work to address those areas before applying at a later date.

Funders also play a key role in encouraging good intergenerational programs. In an effort to spark interest among potential funders, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported *Stronger Together: A Call to Innovation for Funders of Children, Youth and Older Adults* (<http://www.gu.org/Sugge1121370.asp>), a Generations United initiative designed to educate and engaged grantmakers across funding silos. Working with grantmakers,

a draft set of principles were developed and shared through webinars, conference presentations and publications. While some grantmakers responded to the call, they were primarily community or small health foundations. This can make a difference as the Jacksonville Florida Community Foundation demonstrated. The foundation decided to create a new incentive to encourage intergenerational practices among current and potential grantees. Grantseekers could apply for funding for programs to serve older adults or children but if they applied for a grant to engage and serve both age groups, they could request a larger amount. In addition they added an intergenerational question to their application and program officers plant seeds when doing site visits.

Intergenerational Shared Sites

Among entrepreneurs, municipalities and some private funders, there has been increased interest in intergenerational shared sites or centers, resulting in the creation of innovative models across the country including, but not limited to, adult/child care centers, senior centers within schools, and Head Start programs in nursing homes.⁴ By definition these programs share space and include two or more generations that take part in planned activities and unplanned interaction.⁵ Some facilities share administration, staff, equipment, meals and programs, all of which usually result in cost savings and positive outcomes for participants, greater family satisfaction and higher staff retention.⁶

St. Ann Center in Milwaukee Wisconsin is a multigenerational center that provides adult day care and wellness along with early childcare and afterschool programs. Three planned intergenerational activities occur each day along with many unstructured interactions between generations. The program serves 114 children between the ages of 6 weeks and 12 years and 160 older adults. Additionally, 50 youth from the surrounding community attend on a regular basis. Participants and staff report high levels of satisfaction.

Generations of Hope is a licensed foster care and adoption agency in Rantoul, Illinois that operates a planned, geographically contiguous, intergenerational neighborhood called Hope Meadows. Adoptive families and older adults live in their own homes and share an intergenerational center. In exchange for reduced rent, the “honorary grandparents” volunteer a minimum of six hours per week in the Hope community. Research has shown that the “mutual helping” that occurs has led to the older adults reporting that they feel better, have purpose in their lives, and take better care of themselves. And Hope Meadows rate of providing permanent homes for children is two thirds higher than that for the rest of children in Illinois. By the end of 2008, the adoption rate of children living with foster parents in the community was nearly 90%.

Grandfamilies

Intergenerational practice has moved beyond its initial focus on non-related older adults and youth to supporting caregiving families, particularly *grandfamilies*. About 6.5 million children are being raised in households headed by grandparents or other relatives.⁷ Grandparents are raising a total of over 940,000 children without the parents in the home.⁸ These grandparents and other relatives are keeping families together and serving as a safety net, most often keeping children out of the formal foster care system and thereby saving our tax payers billions of dollars.⁹ However, since many grandfamilies face obstacles not encountered by biological parents, support groups and advocacy efforts have been critical to helping the families succeed.

The Brookdale Foundation Group has been instrumental in building a national network of support groups for grandfamilies. For more than 15 years the foundation has provided seed grants to local organizations to begin Relatives as Parents Programs (RAPP). RAPPs provide support groups, educational sessions and respite for caregivers and the children in their care.

Community-Wide Efforts

Communities for All Ages (www.communitiesforallages.org) is a 24 site national initiative that builds the capacity of communities to address critical issues from a multi-generational perspective and promote the well-being of all age groups. Coordinated by the Intergenerational Center at Temple University and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ashoka, and eight community/family foundations, Communities for All Ages is demonstrating the value of creating alliances around common issues. From rural towns in Mississippi and Minnesota to urban neighborhoods in Phoenix, Yonkers, Kalamazoo, and San Clemente, residents and representatives from community organizations are working together to prevent obesity, create safe neighborhoods, support at-risk children and families, and help with immigrant integration.

In March 2012, Generations United recognized the first five best intergenerational communities. The application and criteria are meant to guide community leaders who are seeking to strengthen their communities by valuing and engaging all generations. San Diego County, California was one of the communities recognized. For more than ten years, Pamela Smith has championed intergenerational practices which positioned San Diego County as an incubator for innovative programs. As the director of the San Diego Area Agency on Aging, the Human Services Agency's Aging and Independence Services, Ms. Smith led the formation of

many partnerships with community-based programs leading to the creation of nationally recognized programs that have served large numbers of youth and older adults. Under her leadership, an intergenerational coordinator position was created to support the development of intergenerational programs in the county. She undertook the complex development of two unique intergenerational programs; San Pasqual Academy Neighbors, which houses older adults in homes co-located with group housing for foster youth, and Seniors on Broadway, a senior apartment building that opened on the grounds of a charter school. The county also provided seed grants for 30 start-up intergenerational programs and developed a country wide directory of programs. Of special note are two nationally recognized programs: the Workforce Academy for Youth, a county job's program for foster youth which includes an older adult mentor component, and the Legacy Corps Program.

Seniors4Kids (www.seniors4kids.org) is an initiative of Generations United that raises the voices of older adults in communities in support of policies benefitting children and youth. It is currently underway in five states and engages community leaders and grassroots volunteers to speak out on behalf of investments in children. Operating since 2005, Seniors4Kids has recruited over 1000 Captains4Kids who have made over 5000 direct contacts with state and federal legislators. Captains have published opinion editorials and Letters to the Editor proclaiming older adult support for children in national, state and local publications.

Who Benefits?

Intergenerational practices contribute to the health, well-being and prosperity of individuals of all ages as well as their families and communities.

Increasingly older adults are becoming recognized as resources ready to help children and youth gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. Their efforts have shown positive impacts:

- Children in intergenerational programs had higher personal/social developmental scores (by 11 months) than children in non-intergenerational programs.¹⁰
- Youth involved in intergenerational mentoring relationships showed increases in school attendance, positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding substance use, as well as improvement in related life skills.¹¹
- Over a single school year, students with older adult tutors made over 60% more progress in learning two critical reading skills – sounding out new words and reading comprehension – than similar students without the tutors.¹²

Intergenerational programs offer older adults a venue to do what many believe their role has traditionally been - to help grow the next generation. This investment by older adults in children and youth pays dividends forward and backward. Research shows:

- Older adults who regularly volunteer with children burned 20% more calories per week, experienced fewer falls, were less reliant on canes and performed better on memory tests than their peers.¹³
- Older adults with dementia or other cognitive impairments experience more positive affect during interactions with children than they did during non-intergenerational activities.¹⁴
- Older people in shared sites who previously would not participate in activities came out of their rooms when children arrived and kept better track of time in order to know when the children would be arriving. Older participants also had more energy and ate better when they shared their meals with children.¹⁵

Beyond the benefit for individuals and families, intergenerational practices strengthen interconnectedness within a community. Policy makers and community leaders who make it a point to include all generations support everyone's ability to contribute to their neighborhoods and cities. This engagement builds social capital which has been shown to impact individual health and well-being as well as safety and economic development.¹⁶

Intergenerational practices also use resources judiciously and can encourage a thriving economy. They represent "economies of scope" wherein a single intervention or program helps or positively affects multiple issues and populations. For example, a shared child and adult day care site relieves stress on a middle generation of caregivers by providing quality care in one location, eliminating the time needed for multiple trips to various care facilities supporting greater productivity in the workforce.

Policy Recommendations

World leaders have played a significant role in promoting the importance of generations working together to promote social change. From Queen Elizabeth II who called for bridging the generation gap in her 2006 Christmas message to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who, along with other retired world leaders formed the Elders in July 2007. These leaders have used their bully pulpits to challenge people of all ages to engage with other generations, work on behalf of others and solve global problems. However, leaders in the US are slower to embrace the mantle of "elder." One exception is anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, who along with several of her peers founded Granny Voter in 2004 to challenge older adults to vote on behalf of their grandchildren and children everywhere. Philanthropists and government leaders can

adopt the *Stronger Together* principles mentioned earlier, to create funding opportunities that encourage organizations to act across age sectors and incorporate intergenerational strategies.

Specific recommendations for governments to consider include:

- Create or strengthen ministries or ombudspersons at the national level responsible for using an intergenerational lens to review policies and practices to ensure they are designed so that all generations are viewed and engaged as resources to families, communities and each other.
- Improve or initiate supports and services for family caregivers, strengthen family leave polices and financial support such as refundable tax credits.
- Strengthen or create social protection and antipoverty programs such as pensions, social security and conditional cash transfers.
- Weave policy and funding mechanisms to provide opportunity for more intergenerational shared sites or centers and educational opportunities for people of all ages.
- Raise awareness of the importance of intergenerational solidarity through celebrations, festivals, and holidays while increasing opportunities for intergenerational bonding.

¹ Administration on Aging, United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2009). *A Profile of Older Americans: 2009*.

² Kaplan, M.S., Henkin, N.Z. & Kusano, A. (2002). *Linking Lifetimes: A Global View of Intergenerational Exchange*. Lanham, MD: University Press.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Generations United has mapped over 150 different intergenerational shared site programs across the country. The full listing is available at <www.gu.org>.

⁵ Goyer, A. & Zuses, R. (1988). *Intergenerational Shared Site Project: Final Report*. Washington, DC: AARP.

⁶ Generations United. (2006). *Intergenerational Shared Sites: Making the Case*. Washington, DC: Author and Jarrott, S.E., Schroeder, A. and Perkins, O. (2008). *Intergenerational Shared Sites: Saving Dollars While Making Sense – An Analysis Comparing Operational Cost of Intergenerational Shared Site Facilities*. Washington, DC: Generations United.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). American Community Survey (ACS) 2006-2008. Detailed Table B09006, "Relationship by Householder for Children Under 18 Years in Households."

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). American Community Survey (ACS) 2006-2008. S1001, "Grandchildren Characteristics." Similar data for children begin raised by "other relatives" is not available.

⁹ Generations United. (2007). "Fact Sheet: Challenges of Caring for the Second Family."

¹⁰ Rosebrook, V. (2006). "Research Indicates: Intergenerational Interactions Enhance Young Children's Personal/Social Skills." *Together: The Generations United Magazine*, 11(2), 5.

¹¹ LoSciuto, L., Townsend, T., Rajala, A., & Taylor, A. (1996). "An outcome evaluation of Across Ages: An intergenerational mentoring approach to drug prevention." *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 11(1), 116-129.

¹² Morrow-Howell, N., Jonson-Reid, M., McCrary, S., Lee, Y., & Spitznagel, E.. (June 2009). *Evaluation of Experience Corps: Student Reading Outcomes*. St. Louis, MO: The Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Accessed on 3 November 2010 at <csd.wustl.edu/publications/documents/rp09-01.pdf>.

¹³ Fried, Linda P. et al. (March 2004). "A Social Model for Health Promotion for an Aging Population: Initial Evidence on the Experience Corps Model." *Journal of Urban Health*, 81(1), 64-78.

¹⁴ Jarrott, S.E. & Bruno, K. (2003). "Intergenerational activities involving person with dementia: An observational assessment." *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*. 18(1), 31-37.

¹⁵ Lewis, L. (2002). Intergenerational programs that really work. *Caring for the Ages*, 3(8), 17-22.

¹⁶ Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.