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## A Growing Impact

Why does a Foundation focused on the well-being of disadvantaged children turn its attention to older people? Because they are integral members of the families that raise the children – and of the communities in which they live. When we pay attention to their powerful assets and attitudes, we discover that elders can and do provide support, skills leadership, and social capital that improve the lives of these children.

Elders in the U.S. will comprise more than 20% of the population by 2020, equaling the number of children and youth for the first time. A vibrant and growing set of intergenerational strategies address issues of health, education, civic engagement, transportation, community development, and housing. Although the needs of frail elderly, when unaddressed, can burden families and communities already stressed by social and economic challenges, the potential for elders to be a growing positive force is enormous. Instead of falling into historical competition for resources, we should consider that this population's political, civic, and supportive qualities make them advocates for children.

Older Americans will, over the next 30 years, increase in proportion from 13% to 25% of the country's population, doubling in numbers from 34 million to a projected 70 million. They are retiring earlier, are increasingly financially secure and educated, and are in better health.<sup>1</sup> As a group they remain concerned about the welfare of children, historically committed to their communities, interested in the quality of public education, more civically engaged, and more politically sophisticated than other age groups. They have available what some have called the "third age," two to three decades available for providing critically needed support, specific skills, and life experience to youth and families. Intergenerational strategies appear to hold promise for improving the lives of our nation's disadvantaged children.

## Elders Raising Children

Older people are providing primary care for more than 6 million children in America, including child care, housing, and parenting. While the immediate cause for this practice may be a problem such as poverty, drug use, incarceration, or illness, strong and varied cultural traditions of familial commitment and unity underlie the generosity of many grandparents choosing to parent children for a second time. In some communities of color, the proportion of children being raised by grandparents is as high as 17%, representing a tremendous resource in these communities, relieving the foster care system, and improving the quality of life and connectedness of at-risk children.

Many of these resourceful elders face challenges shared by other economically challenged and stressed families, compounded by a myriad of legal and policy hurdles, as well as their own health and mobility conditions. A growing network of family resource centers, senior advocacy groups, and intergenerational networks are addressing these challenges at local, state, and national levels. Advocates help elders raising children access schools, health care, and housing for themselves and their grandchildren; support groups link these families for peer support; national resource centers and advocacy groups move systems toward greater responsiveness and support.

<sup>1</sup> Profile of Older Americans (U.S. Administration on Aging/National Aging Information Center: 1999). See also a Peter Hart Research Associates survey, *The New Face of Retirement: Older Americans, Civic Engagement, and the Longevity Revolution*, commissioned by Civic Ventures in 1999.



## Elders as Volunteers and Leaders

As members of communities, older people represent a burgeoning population of increasingly healthy, active leaders, a largely untapped source of social and human capital. Americans age 50-75 are “turning out in record numbers to serve their communities and plan to make volunteering and public service a cornerstone of their retirement”<sup>2</sup>. Young people experience improved outcomes in education, health, positive youth development, and avoidance of dangerous risks when involved with an older person as mentor, teacher, or friend.<sup>3</sup>

Community-based organizations are developing creative intergenerational programs in which older Americans are serving young people and families as mentors, tutors, role models, advocates in system access, and organization leaders. The quality and intensity of intergenerational programs have been steadily increasing over the past decade, and evaluation efforts to understand the field are underway. Local leaders can address the needs of families and young people with intergenerational strategies by becoming skilled at recruiting, training, and respecting the leadership of older people. Culturally competent programming will take into account the variety of roles older people comfortably play in households and neighborhood centers and on the streets of our richly diverse neighborhoods.

## Convergent Policy Interests

Significant issues of well-being and access to systems of care and support are shared between people over 65 and children under 18 and their families. Community safety, housing, transportation, education, and access to services are all issues central to the quality of life for each age group. Joining forces in advocacy, community problem-solving, and improving the quality of life would lend to child advocates the considerable and growing political strength of older Americans. National coalition-building is underway around issues of common concern such as welfare reform, health care, social security, and family caregivers. Local collaboration would also strengthen efforts to address policies on which interests of seniors, of children, and of their families converge.

## Communities for All Ages

Ultimately, a life-span approach to the quality of communities will encompass both policy and programs in intergenerational collaboration and planning. Seeing the family as stretching from one end of life to the other will not only harness the great strengths of older people to improve the lives of children, but will recognize the already interconnected nature of their lives.

## Elders as Resources: Intergenerational Strategies Series

In order to deepen understanding and increase mobilization of older adults, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has published an occasional series of useful resources. Initial publications include:

- Communities for All Ages: Planning Across Generations
- Kinship Care: Supporting Those Who Raise Our Children
- Powerful Allies: Mobilizing Older Adults to Build Strong Communities
- Capturing the Windfall: Older Adults in the Social Sector Workforce
- Making What Difference? How Intergenerational Programs Help Children and Families
- Intergenerational Community as Intervention
- Communities for All Ages in Arizona: Documentation Report Part 1

<sup>2</sup> Hart et al., 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Kuehne, Review of Literature: Outcomes for children, youth and families of Intergenerational Programs. Paper prepared for Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003.