

National Civil Service for Seniors: AmeriCorps Foster Grandparent Program

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Abstract

Of the 95 million Americans over-55, only 1 million of those volunteer, even though research has proven it increases longevity and quality of life (Zedlewski, 2006). The American government has invested funding in various volunteer programs through a program called AmeriCorps. Over 40,000 communities across the country are serviced by 270,000 volunteers whose combined volunteering accounts for 1.6 billion service hours yearly. Established in 1965, AmeriCorps mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. One of their programs, the Foster Grandparent Program (FGP), specifically gives 22,000 seniors the opportunity to be a volunteer yearly. FGP seeks to increase the physical, emotional, and economic well-being of this population, and it has had remarkable success. Per AmeriCorps data, most senior volunteers report an increase in positive health outcomes after one year of service. This program's design is worthy of replication by other countries and social service organizations for several reasons. It is one of the few volunteer programs for seniors that offers an annual stipend. The program appeals to funders because not only do seniors benefit, but there are benefits for multiple generations; it is a tutoring program for low-income students and seeks to address a host of other social issues affecting infants, children, teenagers, and young mothers. The intergenerational component of this program is a unique solution to loneliness, which significantly impacts seniors' health.

Keywords: Seniors, Health Outcomes, Volunteering

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Issue/Problem Overview

The primary social issues addressed by this program are loneliness and quality of life for seniors in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau more than 95 million people over 55 live in America (2022). The percentage of older adults who live alone was 6% in 1900 (May 2016, APA.org), and according to Pew research as of 2020, it is now 27% (Ausubel, 2020). To understand this in context, consider this: “in the U.S., 27% of adults ages 60 and older live alone, compared with 16% of adults in the 130 countries and territories studied.” (Ausubel, 2020). This cohort can be seriously impacted by loneliness. According to National Council on Aging (2021), the effects of loneliness on health and well-being are well-documented: “Loneliness is a social phenomenon that has been linked to impaired mental performance, a compromised immune system, and a heightened risk of chronic disease, as well as depression.”

Many changes in our modern society have created the social problems addressed by this program. One problem is the shrinking size of support and socialization from extended family members. Americans are further from their extended families than they were before the industrial revolution. Georgas (2004) suggested that “the adaptation of the family unit to the industrial revolution required a nuclear family structure resulting in its isolation from its traditional extended family and kinship network, leading to psychological isolation.” Maslow (1962) posited that humans have a hierarchy of needs and if the basic social needs are not being met, it is not possible to meet the ‘higher’ needs of esteem and self-actualization. One could argue that FGP, from Maslow’s perspective, **is a program that addresses multiple levels of basic human needs all at once: physiological and psychological well-being, safety and security, socialization, self-esteem, and self-actualization.**

Another historical factor that has led to a more urgent need for a program like this is the increasing number of seniors in America. The baby boom that occurred after World War II ended has led to a current boom in the over-75 population. The Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (2021) found it had already helped to expand the population aged 75 and over by 30%. In 1965, the framers of the FGP identified the problem of loneliness in the elderly and determined that increased socialization through volunteerism could help.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), 4.9 million older Americans (more than 4 and a half times the entire population of San Francisco) were living in poverty in 2019, and “the COVID-19 pandemic has been increasing poverty overall.” (National Council on Aging, 2020). Most of the volunteers for FGP are low-income. This is mandated by the FGP to address rising poverty for seniors. AmeriCorps (2021) offers an annual stipend, supplemental accident, liability and health insurance, and cost reimbursements (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, handbook pp.79-85). Adding these benefits to their social security income can help lift millions of seniors out of poverty, which reduces stress – a scientifically proven factor in health outcomes.

Policy Dealing with Issue

There are four current, relevant factors that affect the need for seniors to engage in civil service and the solution set forth by FGP: the pandemic highlighted the negative effects of loneliness on health, the aging of the baby boomers and increasing longevity have created a need to increase services for seniors, scientific research has correlated the healthy benefits

one receives from volunteering, and the pandemic has brought an awareness that these are unprecedented times so Americans are called to more actively participate in the solutions.

AmeriCorps FGP brings two groups requiring more social interaction together through volunteerism. Its brilliance is in its identifying two segments of our population who are not thriving - who need more caring relationships in their lives - and encourages them to help each other.

Anyone over the age of 55 and living within 200% of the Federal Poverty Line is eligible to become a volunteer. The program gives grants to national and local nonprofits, schools, government agencies, and faith-based or community organizations to start up the program locally (August 16, 2021, AmeriCorps). There are four stated benefits for FGP senior volunteers: a stipend, supplemental accident, liability and health insurance, skills development, and improved health and well-being (August 14, 2021, AmeriCorps). Other benefits for all AmeriCorps volunteers include money for college and trade schools, loan deferment and interest forbearance, and professional development. (August 14, 2021, AmeriCorps). The eligibility and benefits for recipients of FGP services depend on the population the senior commits to; pre-mature infants and children with disabilities receive comforting care, students who receive homework help benefit with higher educational outcomes, and teenagers and young mothers receive mentoring services (August 16, 2021, AmeriCorps). As with the volunteers, all recipients in the program must be from families with incomes that are 200% of FPL (August 16, 2021, AmeriCorps). In addition to these supportive services, recipients can develop a relationship with an additional role model in their young lives.

These benefits sufficiently impact the needs of the senior volunteers. An internal survey of AmeriCorps senior volunteers found that 84% reported improvements in health and well-being after just one year of service (July 28, 2021, AmeriCorps). Many external studies confirm this, such as Zedlewski's study (2006), which found that "older adults who volunteer live longer and with better physical and mental health than counterparts who do not volunteer." The FGP also impacts the lives of many children who are at risk of poor educational outcomes in a positive way; "In FY 2019, AmeriCorps reported that projects supported an estimated 485,000 students achieve academic success" (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, AMR_CNCS p11).

AmeriCorps FGP addresses the needs of multiple oppressed groups. For the over-55 age group, who often experience age discrimination when applying for jobs, the FGP specifically offers skill development, and an alumni network. The supplemental health insurance and stipends are also helpful for the volunteers, the majority of whom are more at risk from Covid since they are low-income, over 55, and persons of color (July 9, 2021, Pepperdine.edu, para.3). In accepting participants, the grantees are also encouraged to prioritize the intersectionality of oppressed students (low-income, homeless, disabled, abused, and neglected children). (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, handbook 7.1.2 No.5). For many of these children, there is no one at home to help them with their homework, and the volunteer steps in to be helpful to that child regularly for years. One unintended consequence of this policy as it currently stands is that there are more children in need than volunteers, which means that children who are already suffering from neglect at home may get stuck waiting for a volunteer and suffer more neglect.

AmeriCorps submits an Annual Management Report that tracks health outcomes for senior volunteers and educational outcomes for the children (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, AMR_CNCS p11). Yotopoulos' (2021) research illuminates the positive outcomes of this program's effect on seniors' health and well-being; volunteers report elevated mood and less depression, increased social interactions and social support, better relationship quality, and decreased loneliness. Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights states, "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible" (July 28, 2021, Youth for Human Rights). The millions of Americans over 55 who are alone in their homes can turn their attention to this human right violation for low-income youth, and through participation in civil service, emerge healthier, happier, and a bit more financially secure.

The Seniors Foster Grandparent Program is funded through AmeriCorps, and AmeriCorps gets its funding through the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is the largest funding source for national and community service. For the fiscal year 2021, AmeriCorps allocated \$114,520,628 to FGP, and the FGP target volunteer level for the year is **22,000** (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, p12).

Gaps in the policy can be found in the absence of a national cohort of senior-specific volunteer coordinator-consultants. "Research shows the organizations that are most successful at recruiting and retaining volunteers have a full-time paid volunteer coordinator." (Yotopoulos, 2021). National programs like this could benefit by having a volunteer coordinator/consultant for each state. A unified cohort of senior-specific volunteer coordinators could, for example, study the FGP programs that have higher enrollments, like Pepperdine University's FGP. Directed by Shanetta Weatherspoon, EdD, that program has doubled its volunteers in 6 years (July 9th, 2021, Pepperdine). National volunteer coordinator-consultants could evaluate successful programs such as this one to unify methods and strategies for all senior volunteer recruitment programs. In effect, they could act as consultants to assist grantee program directors. As it is currently, each organization that receives funding from FGP has these three sources as an aid to recruitment: 1) FGP provides a useful handbook that explains the basics of web-based recruitment and directs grantees to online supporting websites (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, pp.58-61). This is helpful but considering the number of volunteers over 55 who are comfortable with using the internet, are computer literate, and will find their way to these free recruitment and volunteer matching systems, its impact is seriously limited; 2) They encourage grantees to reach out by utilizing their own community networks to find volunteers (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, pp58-61). This is an effective strategy, but it does not address the problem of recruiting grantees. How many local agencies, organizations, churches, and communities have heard about the AmeriCorps' funding programs? The current policy leaves the growth of a program like this subject to hoping that agencies, organizations, and churches in communities know of AmeriCorps' funding opportunities and have the skills, capacity, and time to manage a volunteer program; 3) AmeriCorps Vista is a program of volunteers who feed FGP by providing volunteer referrals (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, para.2). This is an effective resource, but due to the stipend it offers, funding limits the FGP's target number of volunteers to 22,000 (August 17, 2021, AmeriCorps, p.12). The AmeriCorps 2020 Transformation and Sustainability Plan cites 8 goals for the organization to thrive, and one of them is "to make it easier for individuals and organizations to participate" (March 25, 2019, AmeriCorps, para.17). "Recruiting is the most consistent challenge for mentoring programs, and there are always waiting lists for young people hoping to get a volunteer tutor" (A. Evans, personal communications, August 10, 2021). The Biden Administration passed the American

Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which allocated 1 billion dollars to national service programs, some specifically to programs with senior volunteers (August 17, 2021, Americorps, para.6). This is an increase of 89.2 million dollars from the previous year. It is an indication that the American government recognizes the benefits of civil service for seniors. The addition of a national cohort of senior specific FGP volunteer coordinator-consultants could drastically increase the number of FGPs in the U.S. Even more, it could create a renewed national service movement that encourages the **65 million able-bodied seniors** in America to see the mental and physical health benefits of national service. If each state had one designated volunteer coordinator-consultant doing the FGP marketing to new potential grantees, and each grantee had this same personal contact available to help with navigating AmeriCorp grantee policy and recruitment, this program could grow exponentially!

Conclusion

In conclusion, “the U.S. has more older Americans living alone than any other place in the world” (Ausubel, 2020). Loneliness leads to health problems and negative quality of life issues. AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent Program has proven to be extremely effective in reducing loneliness and improving the health and well-being of seniors, yet the program has a limited number of volunteers. A national effort is needed to encourage more programs like FGP, which can help millions of seniors improve their quality of life.

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