

Creating Community for a Lifetime Roadmap

Overview—Promoting Social and Civic Engagement

The Vision

Ageism is a thing of the past. Older adults feel welcome and valued, and participate fully in the life of the community. They remain active in their neighborhoods, communities and beyond, with their roles ranging from neighborhood sage to problem-solvers and social innovators. They avail themselves of an array of social, educational and employment opportunities, according to their needs and preferences.

Desired Outcome

Plentiful and diverse opportunities are available for older adults to remain fully engaged and make meaningful contributions to their communities.

Background

Older Americans represent a vast—but largely untapped—resource for strengthening communities, according to Marc Freedman, an expert on volunteerism and the aging of America. Freedman says older adults offer a unique combination of invaluable experience, the desire to make a meaningful contribution, and what others in society desperately lack—time. Yet he contends that most communities fail to take advantage of this important social asset because they lack the systems to support a new vision of aging.

Freedman points to research showing that many older Americans want to be more involved and that their involvement offers both individual and community benefits: older people remain physically and mentally fit longer when they participate in their communities, and communities gain valuable resources for addressing social issues when older people engage in volunteer work.

The vast majority (93%) of older adults in Kent County regularly socialize with friends, attend religious services or participate in cultural activities. Nearly half volunteer—contributing more than 8 million hours of services each year. And, although only 15% of Kent County elders today work for pay, most research indicates that a higher proportion of baby boomers expect to work well into their “retirement years.” Whether it’s through paid employment, community service, informal relationships or active civic engagement, it’s clear that older adults in Kent County constitute an immeasurable resource with the potential to play a vital role in improving the quality of community life.

According to most estimates, Kent County’s aging population will double in the next 30 years. An older Kent County does not have to be a burden to families, human services, or the health care system. “Rather, this impending transformation may well be a solution waiting to happen—a vast windfall for our communities, and the spearhead for a new era of individual and social renewal,” says Marc Freedman.

A Volunteer Workforce

Kent County elders are more likely than those in other communities to volunteer. While 42% of older adults in Kent County volunteer, nationally only 36% do so.¹

Of those who volunteer in Kent County:

- About a third (32%) donate their time to religious groups.
- About one in ten visit the sick or work in hospitals (12%), provide services for seniors (9%), do favors/chores for family and friends (9%), provide educational assistance (9%), or work with private organizations (9%).
- Other significant volunteer activities include working with kids (8%), providing driver or delivery services (7%), working in civic/social organizations (7%), and in philanthropy, museums or libraries (8%).

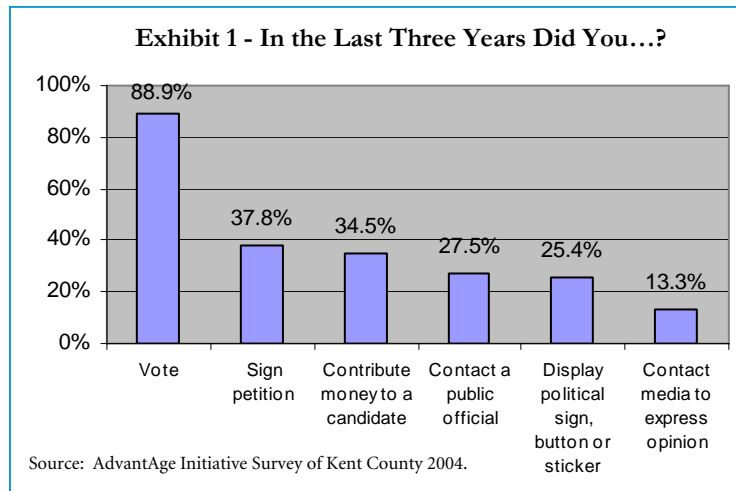
Older volunteers in Kent County devote a substantial amount of time each week to their cause.

Among those who volunteer:

- 39.6% spend five or more hours per week in volunteer activities.
- 49% contribute less than five hours per week.
- 11.4% weren't sure how many hours a week they volunteer.

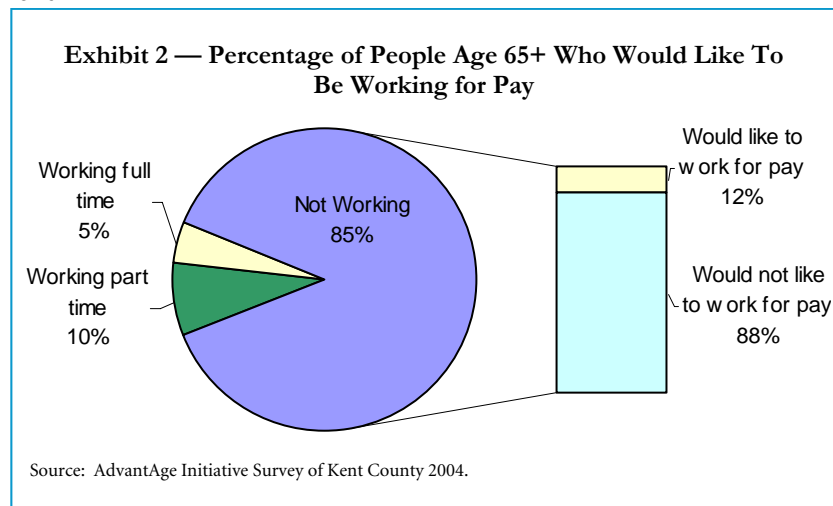
Political Voice

Another way for older adults to be active in community is by expressing their opinions. Nearly 9 out of 10 of Kent County's older adults reported voting in the past three years. More than 1 in 3 signed a petition or contacted a public official to express an opinion.



Few Elders Work for Pay – And Most Like It That Way!

Overall, only a small proportion of older adults in Kent County work full time (5%) or part time (10%)—about the same as national figures. The vast majority (85%) do not work for pay and



¹ Feldman, Penny H., Mia R. Oberlink, Elizabeth Simantov, and Michael G. Gursen (April 2004). *A tale of two older Americas: Community opportunities and challenges*. Report on the 2003 national survey of adults aged 65 and older. New York: Center for Home Care Policy & Research, Visiting Nurse Service of New York, page 8. Retrieved March 2, 2005 from www.vnsny.org/advantage/survey.html#survey.

Social & Civic Engagement continued

are not interested in working for pay. Only 12% of the non-working elders in Kent County would like to work for pay—fewer than found in other communities surveyed (14% - 33%) and nationally (24%).

Despite Involvement, Isolation Still a Problem for Some

A number of responses indicate that social isolation can be a significant problem for older adults in Kent County.

- Over 18% would like to be more socially active.
- A quarter did not socialize with friends or neighbors in the past week.
- More than one in five say they have no close friends in their neighborhood.
- Nearly half don't get out of the house every day.

Issue Areas

Creating Community for a Lifetime addressed three issue areas in developing recommendations for achieving the vision of a community that promotes social and civic engagement:

- **Connections and Contributions**
- **Lifelong Learning**
- **Employment**