



THE BOOMER SOLUTION:  
**SKILLED TALENT TO MEET  
NONPROFIT NEEDS**

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## Acknowledgements

The National Council on Aging thanks The Atlantic Philanthropies for its investment in developing innovative approaches and models to address pressing social needs at a time of shifting demographics and emerging new paradigms. Its generous support enabled us to build the Models of Significant Service (MSS) initiative's foundation and its ongoing evaluation and technical assistance structures, as well as provide grants to the initial 12 MSS demonstration sites. In addition, we want to thank the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust for its support in underwriting the replication of the MSS initiative with 10 organizations in its home base, Maricopa County, Arizona.

Finally we want to acknowledge the hard work, collective learning, knowledge sharing, and esprit de corps of the 22 community-based nonprofits that brought Models of Significant Service to life in their organizations (identified in Appendix A).



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## Executive Summary



With a record-setting wave of older Americans now reaching retirement age, the demand for community services is growing at an unprecedented rate. But do communities across the country have the capacity to keep up with it? In fact, they do—although they may not yet realize it. While it's true that some “young” older adults require support services, a large number remain vital, active, and socially engaged, constituting a rich pool of available talent. Many are highly skilled, and a significant percentage has managerial or professional experience. For nonprofit community-service organizations, they represent an abundant, burgeoning, and untapped resource.

The National Council on Aging (NCOA) is helping organizations use this resource to meet pressing social needs. Over the last three years, NCOA's *RespectAbility* Initiative worked with 22 nonprofit organizations around the country to foster the engagement of older adult volunteers in leadership and professional-level roles. The mandate was to develop innovative models—“Models of Significant Service” (MSS)—to engage and manage this new cadre of age 55+ volunteers. The program demonstrated the transformative, capacity-building power of these highly skilled retirees—and showed a path for all community nonprofits to provide enhanced services and achieve greater social impact.

### **A Huge Strategic Asset—Underappreciated, Undervalued and Underutilized**

The initiative set out to demonstrate a critically important set of hypotheses about older Americans and nonprofit organizations:

- This growing population of highly educated and exceptionally experienced older adults represents a major, untapped resource that could fill leadership and professional roles in community-based nonprofit organizations.
- These volunteers could greatly augment the capacity of those organizations, enabling them to meet the increasing demands of their communities and clients.
- The volunteers' skills and talents would provide value that exceeds the investment required to engage and manage them.
- Tapping this human resource could ultimately alter the landscape of civic engagement in the United States.

In doing community service, the volunteers would also find personal meaning and satisfaction that would enrich their lives. Over the course of the two-year MSS project, NCOA has succeeded in turning these hypotheses into reality on the ground.

## Building a Case

Unfortunately, not all organizations are ready to capitalize on this abundant resource. Success requires cultural, structural, behavioral, and leadership qualities that support organizational change and innovation. But too many nonprofit leaders focus on scarcity and fail to see the potential bounty in front of them.

The Respect*Ability* Initiative set out to convince these leaders by building a strong case for utilizing highly skilled older adults in leadership-level volunteer roles. To test the hypothesis that the value of the services such volunteers provide would surpass the cost of recruiting and managing them, NCOA developed an online benchmarking and return-on-investment-calculating tool. The 22 MSS sites used the tool over the course of their projects, and an equal number of non-MSS community-based organizations were also recruited to participate in piloting the ROI tool—Strategic Metrics and Results Tracking (SMART).

## Is It Worth the Effort?

The answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” While it takes investment on the part of nonprofits to attract, engage, and manage leadership-level volunteers, the experience of over 40 NPOs around the country (MSS demonstration sites and others) shows that the return on that investment is strikingly impressive. Participating organizations achieved an average return-on-investment of nearly 800 percent.

Building on lessons learned over the course of the MSS initiative, NCOA is prepared to share techniques and tools that can jump-start nonprofits’ efforts to build

capacity and better serve their communities. These resources will help align nonprofit organizational needs with the expectations of potential Boomer volunteers and help NPOs fully leverage the extraordinary talents these volunteers possess.

## This Report

This report outlines how best to leverage the talents of skilled older adults and what is gained in return:

- Organizational practices that proved to maximize the impact of adult 55+ volunteers
- Higher-level volunteer roles and their added value
- NCOA’s return-on-investment (ROI) approach to assessing unpaid work and characterizing organizations that realize success
- Overviews of the 22 participating MSS sites’ individual models
- Fundamental principles from past NCOA research
- Proven successful techniques, ranging from team structures, to participatory evaluation, to social networked knowledge sharing

These findings are the first in a stream of materials intended to advance older adult civic engagement and help ensure that communities throughout the country benefit from the abundant resource that adults 55+ represent.