

~ Community Involvement ~

Honoring Older Volunteers: The California Senior Leaders Program

This article is the third in a series on innovative and promising practices that expand upon six domains featured in our recent publication, "A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well." The domains are: Varied Housing Options, Transportation, Community Involvement, Employment, Lifelong Learning, and Supportive Services.

While the rapid aging of California's population presents many new challenges to local governments, it also brings tremendous opportunities, particularly in the arena of volunteerism. Not every older Californian will want to, or be able to, volunteer. Nonetheless, many will be seeking new avenues for civic engagement, offering their communities a valuable talent pool.

Research indicates that volunteering can lead to better health, especially among older adults who are particularly vulnerable to illness and depression (The Health Benefits of Volunteering, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007). The physical and social engagement gained through volunteering can improve the well-being of older adults, and it is a meaningful way for communities to benefit from their contributions. Although older volunteers can't (and shouldn't) be expected to replace needed health and social services, tapping this reservoir of talent will be invaluable as we seek to better address and advocate on behalf of human needs. In this light, there are key lessons from a statewide program on the value of training, networking, and recognition of older volunteers.

"Seniors have been called our only expanding natural resource," said Meredith Minkler, Dr.P.H., founding director of the UC Center on Aging at U.C. Berkeley. Minkler is principal investigator on a project bringing more attention

and support to that resource. The 2002-2008 California Senior Leaders Program, funded by grants from The California Wellness Foundation, provides recognition and training for older volunteers and advocates making a notable difference in their communities.

"We're trying to build a network of senior leaders," Marty Martinson, Dr.P.H. candidate and director of the project, told Berkeley's Public Health Magazine.



Honorees Grace Pacheco and Chizu Iiyama celebrate at a Senior Leaders event.

Recently the program brought together its new class of thirty 2007 Senior Leaders, ages 60-92, for two days of intensive networking and training. Among the honorees was Oakland's Bobbie Bond, who helped create the city's "Feet on the Street" program that organizes walking groups for seniors in high crime neighborhoods. A member of the Mayor's Commission on Aging, Bond also is creating an innovative new program through which low income high school students are trained to be chefs and caterers, preparing and delivering meals to senior centers.

Meanwhile in rural Santa Ynez, fellow Senior Leader Grace Pacheco continues her leadership role with the Chumash Indian community, working with its health clinics and teaching children the tribal ways. In the words of fellow tribal elder (and former Senior Leader) Adelina Alva-Padilla, "There is not a person in this community who doesn't feel deep love for Gracie...She has been involved in

politics here since before the houses were built [and] has done so much for preserving the culture."

Many California Senior Leaders are involved in violence prevention; others run programs to educate youth against racism, advocate for the homeless, foster healthy aging, and promote community-building. In addition to the training and networking event, participants receive 12 months of follow-up support by graduate students at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health, who check in regularly with each leader and provide technical assistance.

The Senior Leaders training has already helped award recipient Bond, who is using new fundraising skills to seek support for her intergenerational catering program. Meanwhile, the life stories she heard from fellow Senior Leaders and Japanese internment camp survivors, Chizu Iiyama and Jim Yamaichi, have further inspired her commitment to social justice and community-building.

The lives of the more than 90 California Senior Leaders are a living testimony to the benefits of senior volunteering. Many have noted that their efforts to make a difference in the community have made their own lives richer. In the words of one, "I find my own self through helping others."

To learn more about the California Senior Leaders Program, visit <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~aging/SeniorLeaders07/index.html>.



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