

COALITION URGES MORE SENIORS TO VOLUNTEER

When we hear the words Peace Corps, AmeriCorps or VISTA, we think of programs for idealistic young people who want to serve the community. Most senior citizens seeking a meaningful post-retirement activity would not even consider looking into these programs. Yet it turns out that these programs are actively seeking to recruit more people aged 55 and older. This was just one of the lessons imparted at this year's Senior Agenda Coalition Annual Senior Conference on October 30th. The Conference, attended by 260 people, had a theme of "Get Involved, It's Good for You and the Community."

A prime example is AmeriCorps, the "domestic Peace Corps". This federally funded program engages full and part-time volunteers in one year of intensive community service. Members receive a modest living allowance and an education award of up to \$4,750 to repay student loans or defray future educational costs. Recent federal law not only mandated that AmeriCorps recruit more seniors but also allowed older adults who complete their AmeriCorps to designate their education award for use by their grandchildren or other young relatives.

This year the Senior Agenda Coalition has focused much of its efforts on expanding home and community-based services to keep seniors "aging in the community." However, it's not enough to have a safety net of care and support available in our own homes. A substantial body of research indicates active engagement in the community is vital to our well-being as seniors. One study that tracked 2,700 seniors over a period of thirteen years found that "social and productive activities that fit within the definition of civic engagement reduced mortality as much as physical fitness activities did."

Our conference focused on "civic engagement," a term that includes volunteering, lifelong learning, paid employment and social activism. Through a partnership with Serve Rhode Island, Rhode Island's central point of contact for volunteering opportunities and AmeriCorps information, and our state's RSVP's (Retired Senior Volunteer Programs), we were able to bring a special emphasis on opportunities for volunteering.

We featured senior volunteers who are involved in a wide variety of activities: Frank Murga, a VISTA who trains other seniors and senior centers in emergency preparedness; Gene Burgess, a docent at Roger Williams Park Zoo; a woman who is a "comfort provider" for abandoned cats at an animal shelter. Another workshop featured a senior who first served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Africa and then 35 years later served in the Peace Corps again in Morocco. Throughout the day conference participants visited a Volunteer Village, where they could talk with outreach persons for all of these programs and even explore current volunteering opportunities via the Internet.

We also learned some troubling facts about the current state of senior volunteering in Rhode Island. A report from the Corporation for National and Community Service found that only 17% of Rhode Island's older adults (65 years and older) volunteer, ranking us 49th among the states. Serve Rhode Island calculates that if Rhode Island's older adult volunteer rate was at the national average, 23.5%, there would be another 9,273 seniors contributing to the community and enjoying the benefits of volunteering.

The Senior Agenda Coalition and Serve Rhode Island have convened a diverse advisory committee to begin work on solutions to this problem. Anyone interested in participating or with suggestions should contact me at 274-6900, extension 205 or by e-mail at senioragendari@yahoo.com. Links to information from the Senior Agenda Coalition Conference, including a video of our keynote speaker's presentation, may be found on this Website's Homepage.