

Baby boomers want to serve. Let's give them the chance.

Commentary by U.S. Representative John P. Sarbanes

Elected in 2006, Congressman John P. Sarbanes represents Maryland's third congressional district.

In the coming decade, our nation will face serious challenges at every level. Our hospitals and community clinics are already unable to handle the volume of patients clamoring for care. The poorest and most vulnerable members of our society need better access to and representation in our legal system. Our critical infrastructure—our bridges, highways, railroads and other public works—will need serious upgrades to meet our nation's most basic needs. Our public schools are struggling to provide adequate instruction in critical areas, pushed to the breaking point by shrinking state and local budgets and a shortage of qualified faculty.

We can only meet these challenges if we have dedicated individuals who are willing to take up the cause of public service—teachers, community physicians, nurses, civil servants and public service attorneys, to name a few. These tasks demand ingenuity and commitment, and many are best done by people with experience and expertise.

Fortunately, if we adopt policies that are smart and creative, help is on the way. The millions of baby boomers moving beyond their midlife careers represent a huge reservoir of expertise and experience—and they want to do the work we need to have done.

The 2008 *MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey* shows that the generation forged in the social activism of the 1960s shares a desire to remain engaged in civic life into their 50s, 60s and beyond. Almost half (44.7%) of respondents age 44 to 70 expressed interest in social purpose encore careers. And they are in addition to the millions who are already in encore careers.

While this response reveals tremendous opportunity, much must be done to engage, coordinate, and support willing boomers' transition to encore careers. If we are not ready, this demographic wave will crash over our heads—a wasted opportunity. But if we anticipate the potential of the baby boomer generation, that wave can help lift up our society and propel it forward.

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We can build a foundation for this career shift with innovative policies at the state and local level partnered with creative, dynamic programs in the nonprofit community. For example, in my district, Governor Martin O'Malley and Baltimore Mayor Shelia Dixon have provided support for Experience Corps, a program that helps channel retirees into public service volunteer and stipended opportunities in K-3 education.

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The Baltimore Experience Corps program, hosted by the Greater Homewood Community Corporation and studied by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, is one of 20 such programs in cities across the country and currently places more than 370 adults over 55—some receiving stipends, others working as volunteers—in 20 Baltimore schools. As a result of the additional help, thousands of students have learned to read, test scores have gone up, and suspensions are down. Even the health of the tutors has improved.

Yet this survey reveals that baby boomers' interest in getting involved goes beyond the urge to volunteer.

According to its results, boomers have a strong drive (and many have a strong financial need) to engage in a paid second career in public service.

Only with a consistent support system at all levels will we be able to fully harness this potential. The structural and logistical barriers to a second career in primary and secondary education provide just one example of how inconsistency can create confusion, hindering aspiring career changers.

All 50 states have alternatives to the traditional college-based teacher education certification programs. However, they vary not only by state, but also within each state. For boomers seeking the best (and quickest) path to encore careers in public education, approximately 485 alternate programs are available. It's not easy to figure out where to start.

What's more, many boomers, separated from our schools for 30 to 40 years, mistakenly believe that a transition back into the classroom as a teacher or a classroom assistant will be an easy one. While they already have the content knowledge needed to teach, acculturating to the school environment and learning about student development and teaching methods require new skills. Midlife internships and advising services can provide the information these prospective teachers need to transition as smoothly and effectively as possible.

It's clear that boomers want to make our schools better. In 2006, more than 35,000 individuals, many of them in the second half of their adult lives, changed careers and sought certification to teach through alternative certification programs. Not all of them will make it through the first year of teaching. More must be done to bolster recruitment, selection, mentoring, and support for these new teachers as they become certified and enter the classrooms.

Of course, public school teaching is just one area of need. Thanks to the work of Civic Ventures, we now have confirmation of the enormous potential for baby boomers to meet significant needs in our society through encore careers in education, health care, government service, and the nonprofit sector.

The *Encore Career Survey* offers a snapshot of public attitudes toward service that will ultimately build the political will necessary to enact the substantial change that can come as a result of encore careers. Grassroots action, when met with financial support, public infrastructure, and guidance from government, will allow our country to come together and address America's greatest challenges. This survey offers important guidance and a big first step in the journey. ■

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