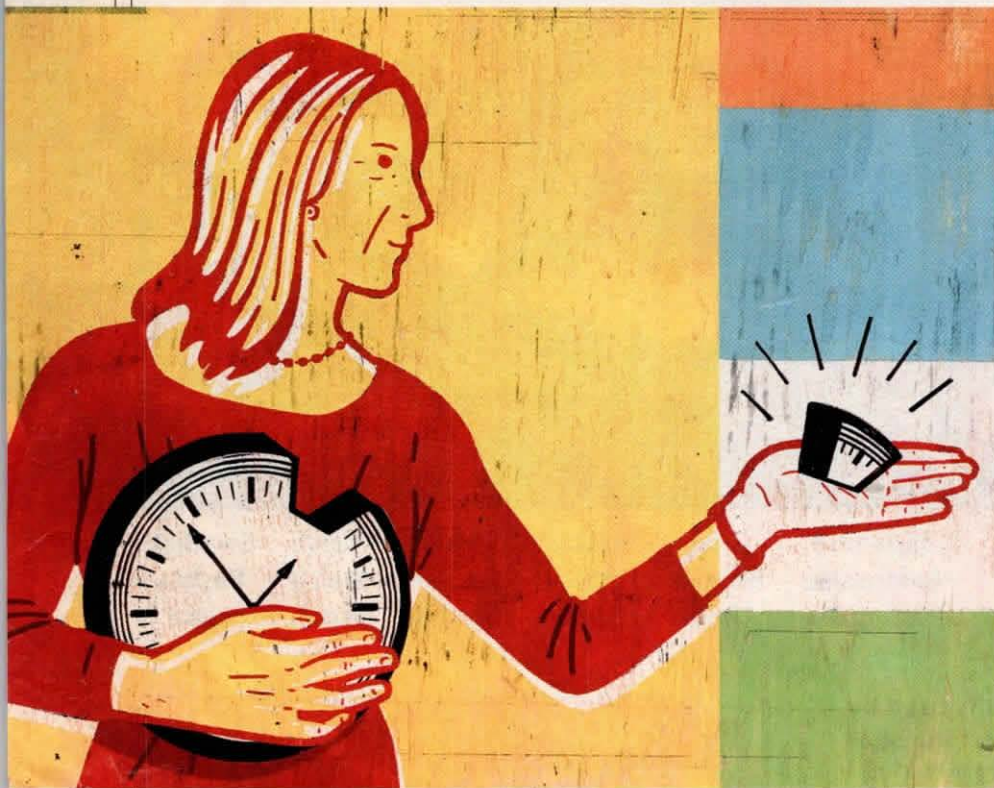


# Giving Expertise

The new volunteers: more than envelope stuffers



By FRANCINE RUSSO

**WHEN A CALL GOES OUT** for volunteers for a good cause, Pamela Ramsden shows up. But this administrator at Episcopal Church headquarters in New York City has become irritated with some charity organizers. On one cleanup day, for example, nobody could find the paintbrushes, and everyone sat around eating bagels and chatting. “You want me to clean the bathrooms?” Ramsden asked impatiently. “O.K., but be sure you have the damn

bucket here and don’t waste my time. I have better things to do.”

Ramsden, 61, is typical of many boomers and preboomers. They want to help make a better world, but they’re busy. As for the unpaid work their mothers did—stuffing envelopes, ladling out soup in a church kitchen—forget it. Some, like Ramsden, will donate a few hours to such efforts, but most boomers, most of the time, are unwilling to offer themselves up as just another warm body.

According to a 2004 report by the

Harvard School of Public Health in conjunction with the MetLife Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement, if the members of this best-educated generation in history step up, they want to do good in ways that tap into their expertise and experience. They also want to see the impact they’re making. And that’s not all. If they’re retired, they look to public service to replace what they enjoyed about working: camaraderie, intellectual stimulation, the sense of achieving a goal. And they want all this only when it fits in with their lives—

weekly, seasonally or on a one-time basis to respond to a crisis.

The good news for boomers restless to use their energies in new, socially productive ways is that innovative openings are springing up every day that not only satisfy these needs but also provide unanticipated bonuses.

Ramsden found her perfect slot at the Grace Institute’s mentoring program, where she coaches low-income women on the skills they need to land office jobs: appropriate office behavior, résumé writing and self-presentation. A favorite tutorial she conducted focused on the dos and don’ts of e-mails. Drawing on her own experience, she offered anecdotes of disastrously funny mistakes—like hitting REPLY to a Listserv message, not realizing everyone in the office would read a catty remark about a colleague. “You’re teaching these women about relationships in the workplace,” Ramsden says. “I can see the difference I make.”

Ramsden didn’t fall into this assignment. She helped create it as a member of the Transition Network (TTN), an organization of retired professional women who help one another explore the next chapters in their lives. Initially, TTN found few volunteer opportunities that matched its members’ high-level skills. So it approached the Grace Institute and other worthy charities with proposals for new programs. In return, TTN asked that its members be used in teams—because the women wanted the collegiality of working together.

The Transition Network is just one of a host of new nonprofits that are rethinking and retooling volunteerism. Civic Ventures, which sets up new programs to be run by existing nonprofits, is another. Some recent start-ups have carved out their own social-action niches and enlist their own recruits. Aaron Hurst, for example, founded Taproot in 2001 to fill a void he perceived for business professionals who wanted to make a civic contribution. “Five years ago,” he says, “volunteer assignments were nearly all direct service: soup kitchens, tutoring kids, stuffing envelopes. Nonprofits were not focused on people contributing their skills.”

Taproot tailors the volunteer efforts of its business experts to fit their lives. Each volunteer agrees to work five hours a week on a five-month project



with a five-member team, each providing pro bono the same service that he provides for paying clients. Taproot member Candice Laxton, 54, a creative director in Menlo Park, Calif., helped produce a brochure for SAVE (Safe Alternatives to Violent Environments), an advocacy group for abused women. Laxton is typical of many boomers who, in earlier years, put some of their youthful activism on hold while establishing careers and families. "I'm an old '60s girl," she says. "Then I was out in the streets protesting, and now I feel I've come full circle."

"The leadership in volunteerism is not coming from traditional nonprofits," says Marc Freedman, Civic Ventures' president and co-founder, "but from a new generation of social entrepreneurs, boomers and preboomers who are taking matters into their own hands." Numbers tell part of the story. During the 1950s and early '60s, according to Leonard Steinhorn, author of the forthcoming *The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy*, there were about 5,000 IRS-approved nonprofits. "From the 1970s through the 1990s, when boomers came into their own," he says, "that number soared to nearly 45,000."

The ventures run the gamut from

medical clinics staffed by retired doctors and nurses to legal clinics for disadvantaged children. New activities like these are attracting more men to volunteerism, which has historically been dominated by women. At Taproot, men make up 38% of the membership. The gender revolution—in which more women have gone to work—has reduced the traditional pool of female volunteers even as expertise-based assignments are drawing in more men. "Because we are now in a knowledge economy," Steinhorn says, "knowledge is what both women and men can contribute."

The new style of volunteer is typified by Washington trauma researcher Roger Fallot, 56. He donates time to Witness Justice, a three-year-old pro-

gram that helps victims of violent crime with psychological and legal issues. He reviews information on the group's website and responds by e-mail to victim queries within his field. "This feels like it utilizes something I've spent years developing," he says, noting that his only hesitation about signing up had been the time required. But Witness Justice's program addresses this concern by routing every website query to at least three experts, only one of whom needs to respond. "I feel entirely comfortable saying I'm too busy

**“THE LEADERSHIP IS COMING from a new generation of social entrepreneurs.”** —Marc Freedman, president, Civic Ventures

now," Fallot says. "The flexibility is critical."

Other volunteers want to steer away from work-related projects, as long as the assignment engages them at a high level. Innovative nonprofits are designing projects accordingly. The Medicare Rights Center in New York State set up a program called Seniors Out Speaking to attract recent retirees who would like to develop a useful new field of expertise. The center gives the retirees intense training in the complex array of available Medicare plans, after

which they can choose to give monthly hour-long presentations at various community venues. Or they can sign up for "Medicare Minute," returning regularly to the same senior center with a different five-minute speech on an aspect of the new insurance law. "It's appealing to boomers," says volunteer director Betty Duggan, "getting up and being an expert."

Knowledge-based programs such as Medicare Rights are drawing new enlistees with that boomer mantra of achieving personal growth. Retired elementary school teacher Linda Sicher, 58, of New York City, for example, pieced together several volunteer turns to combat her greatest postwork fear: "that my brain will die." Not a chance. Each activity has taught her something new, and she has been able to connect the dots between them. Once every month she's on call at the Mt. Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention (SAVI) program, ready to speed to the side of a rape or abuse victim before the professionals arrive. Leveraging her training for SAVI, she created a program on child abuse at the Family Center in Manhattan for grandmothers raising grandchildren alone.

When the slot fits the volunteer perfectly, the experience may even help answer the eternal question: What do I do with the rest of my life? Robert Kinney, 58, head of the Federal Public Defender's Office in Las Cruces, N.M., may have found his answer when he agreed to a stint for the International Senior Lawyers Project, which uses experienced attorneys to promote the rule of law around the world. After Kinney

spent three months (pro bono, but with expenses paid) setting up Bulgaria's first public defender's office and a month in Mongolia on a similar mission, his vision for retirement was transformed. He and his wife sold their intended retirement haven, a house in Honduras. Now he hopes to move to Budapest after retirement and be a Senior Lawyers volunteer throughout Eastern Europe. Kinney had not looked forward to retiring, but now he says, "I'd love to retire if I could do this kind of work and not just lie in a beach chair." ■