

An untapped *wealth of talent*

Grant will capitalize on retiree skills and commitment

By LINDA HERSEY

Maine has a silent army of civic leaders and volunteers poised and ready to be activated to improve the quality of life for all residents.

They are retirees – men and women who’ve had fulfilling careers and are embarking on a new chapter in their lives.

That is the message the Maine Community Foundation brings, as it prepares to develop a statewide system for tapping and training older Mainers to fill civic leadership roles and other critical volunteer posts in the state.

A \$95,000 grant from the Atlantic Philanthropies is enabling the nonprofit to draw a blueprint for recruiting baby boomers and seniors as civic leaders and creating a statewide system to support them.

Once completed, the program – called the Community Experience Partnership – will serve as a statewide network of Mainers 60 and older who want to make a difference in their communities and state. They may be tapped, for example, to serve on municipal Planning Boards, volunteer at polling places, tutor in schools or lead nonprofits.

The grant is the second phase of the Community Experience Partnership, in which 10 U.S. community foundations were chosen to create programs that boost

the civic engagement of baby boomers. The Maine Community Foundation’s goal is to have its statewide program up and running – and accepting participants – by November 2009.

The Atlantic Philanthropies is willing to provide an additional \$400,000 for the Maine Community Foundation to implement and run the program, but the nonprofit will have to raise matching funds in the community first.

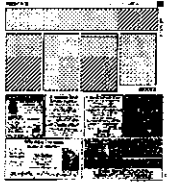
“Maine’s greatest asset is our people,” said Henry Schmelzer, Maine Community Foundation president. “This grant will allow us to develop a customized program for Maine people who are planning to retire – or who are retired – and who want to make a significant difference in the public and nonprofit sectors.”

Maine seems an especially good fit for mining the rich resources of expertise, education and experience that baby boomers and seniors offer:

- Maine has the oldest population in the nation, including a high proportion of baby boomers. While baby boomers represent 28 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 32 percent of Maine’s.
- Maine is a magnet for retirees. It has the sixth-highest in-migration of retirees in the U.S. Many are well-educated, younger and affluent.
- Mainers like to volunteer. About a third of Maine residents, ages 55-64, volunteer in their communities.

(continued on page 14)

These days there is much focus on baby boomers, just because of their sheer numbers alone.



With the first of 77 million baby boomers turning 60 this year, the United States is facing a massive demographic shift, according to the Maine Community Foundation.

Retirement is no longer the end of the road for people but represents a new beginning – a time of life to pursue goals without the responsibilities of a daily job or raising a family.

Many Americans at mid-life and beyond seek second careers instead of retirement. They may have strong memories of JFK imploring young Americans to volunteer.

Community service seems to be a good fit.

“I’ve always felt that people need to give back to society in some way. We as a society always take. We take resources, money and time. Everybody has to reach out and find their own way,” said Tom Blake, who successfully ran for South Portland City Council the same year he retired from the municipal fire department after three decades of service.

Blake said that after retiring he felt the need to give back to the community where he grew up and raised his own children. He said he has never forgotten the civic spirit that the nation’s leaders 40 and 50 years ago invoked in the American people.

“I loved John Kennedy. I was in the sixth grade when he died,” Blake said. “Back then people got involved, because they believed in the American dream.”

But for every self-driven volunteer like Blake there are dozens of other retirees who are not involved in their communities. Many people want to be involved but are not sure how to go about it.

A survey of older Americans conducted by the foundation showed that

one in five respondents would volunteer if asked.

Although a lot of baby boomers decide on their own to volunteer in their communities, Maine Community Foundation’s goal is to create a network that supports their interests and efforts. The group’s goal is to implement the Community Experience Partnership in 50 communities by tapping existing, locally based nonprofits.

The foundation already has linked with some well-known organizations that focus on older Mainers, including the state Office of Elder Services, the Area Agencies on Aging, the Maine AARP and the University of Maine Center on Aging.

The idea is to form and sustain partnerships with all the stakeholders – including government agencies, private businesses, schools and other nonprofits.

With assets of \$245 million, the Maine Community Foundation has been partnering with donors and nonprofit to strengthen Maine communities for 25 years

“There already are a lot of good leadership training programs in place and we can customize the training for baby boomers in their community,” said Meredith Jones, vice president of program development and grant making for the Maine Community Foundation. “Participants can use these new-found skills and knowledge to take leadership roles at nonprofits or to run for City Council.”

According to the Maine Community Foundation, the need is great for volunteerism. There are hundreds of vacancies in volunteer posts at the municipal level. For example, the town of Wells has a 20 percent vacancy rate on its municipal boards.

Across the state, income and job growth lag compared to the rest of the nation, while the cost of living is high.



"We have the opportunity in this state to capture the talent of baby boomers, who tend to be well educated and very healthy," Jones said. "Most don't see themselves going off into the sunset. They have the rest of their lives and they want to give back."

