

Generations United

Statement Submitted to

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Introduction

Generations United (GU) thanks the Environmental Protection Agency for the opportunity to provide this statement concerning priorities for research and education to address environmental hazards that threaten the health of older persons.

This statement focuses on intergenerational strategies to promote environmental action and address critical environmental health issues. Intergenerational programs are an increasingly popular way of sharing resources by bringing young and old together through mutually beneficial exchange and have tremendous potential to increase the involvement of older adults in environmental issues. These programs have proven particularly effective because they meet numerous needs of old, young, families, and communities and are cost effective. Intergenerational programs also engage this country's only growing natural resource, older adults. Currently there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of intergenerational programs of all types and sizes operating in rural, suburban, and urban communities across the nation.

There is growing interest in intergenerational programs that address critical environmental health hazards. Unfortunately, there is little information on model programs and best practices. There is a need for demonstration projects, technical assistance, and profiles on model programs in order to help proliferate these important types of intergenerational programs. While existing research validates the value of intergenerational environmental programs, available data is limited and more research on such programs is needed to inform the development of future programs.

About Generations United

GU is the only national nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older adults through intergenerational public policies, strategies, and programs. GU was founded in 1986 by the Child Welfare League of America, the National Council on the Aging, the Children's Defense Fund, and AARP and now includes over 100 national, state, and local organizations representing more than 70 million Americans.

GU serves as a clearinghouse of information on intergenerational initiatives. GU publishes and disseminates publications, provides training on intergenerational issues, offers the only national intergenerational conference, and administers the only national intergenerational program database which is available on-line. GU is proud of our partnership with EPA to provide a special conference training event on Intergenerational Environmental Health Programs this fall.

Background on Intergenerational Programs

Historically, the family with its extended network was responsible for the various nurturing, educational, and economic functions required to maintain and support its members. Over the course of the last century, America has become highly segregated by age. Family functions have been assumed by a range of more or less age-specific institutions. Children attend age-segregated schools; adults work in environments almost exclusive of children under 16 and adults over 65; older adults often live in senior only housing; and both children and older persons are cared for in single age-use facilities (day or long-term care). Furthermore, too few American institutions bring together people of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, races, and ethnicities in a common cause. Both young people and older adults suffer from a sense of isolation.

In a society where members of different generations are increasingly fragmented, separated, and isolated from one another, the ever-expanding intergenerational field works to bring people of different ages together. The first documented intergenerational program, the federally sponsored Foster Grandparents Program, began operation in 1965. Lower income older adult volunteers were recruited to provide support and services to young children with special or exceptional needs.

The intergenerational movement began as a component of the “war on poverty,” as well as in response to concerns about a growing separation between young and old, and the increasing isolation of the old. Over the last three decades, it has developed into a more systematic effort to address social problems, especially those affecting low-income children and other isolated groups.

Intergenerational program settings and activities are varied. Older persons are serving as tutors, mentors, school partners, and child care providers in numerous school- and community-based settings; young people are providing chore services, friendly visiting, and teaching older people computer skills in their homes, in senior centers, and in long term care settings.

All intergenerational programs are structured so that both age groups benefit from the interaction, but in many programs, one age group is the provider of service and the other age group is the recipient of service. For example, older people mentor young children or adolescents; or college students teach older adult immigrants English as a second language. In many communities both young and old are working together, as partners in service. The participants are finding that the collaborations lead to an appreciation of young and old for each other and the communities are reaping the benefits of their work.

Although all intergenerational programs offer numerous benefits such as sharing and learning between generations, dispelling stereotypes about young and old, and exchanging culture and history, a growing number of programs possess

additional power because they engage young and old in service to their communities together. Young and old participants work side by side to serve others. In many instances they work together to plan, design, and implement the project. Examples include working together in a homeless shelter, collaborating on an environmental project (such as a community recycling center or a community garden), or helping the community explore social concerns and develop problem solving strategies through the arts and dialogues.

It is within these types of programs, programs where young and old are working together, that there is the greatest opportunity for environmental programs.

Model Intergenerational Environmental Programs

Model intergenerational programs currently operate in a variety of states and localities across the nation. Programs include local community-based programs, national days of service, and university programs that promote intergenerational wellness. The following are a few examples:

The Area Agency on Aging, region 1, in Phoenix, Arizona organizes an annual intergenerational advocacy conference. This program brings together 50 high school students and fifty older people from across the state. The group meets for a day and a half of advocacy training. They study an issue of interest to both older and younger people and work as teams to develop strategies for positive social change. Past themes have revolved around environmental issues including one entitled, "Community Mobilization for Arizona's Endangered Environment." The young and old participants explored how to protect themselves, their families, and their communities from environmental hazards, through education and advocacy efforts. Such intergenerational forums could be replicated across the U.S. to unite older and younger people in addressing environmental issues.

In Mobile, Alabama the GLOBE program (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment) unites younger and older people in studying the environment. Seniors citizen from Senior Citizens Service of Mobile join school- age children in making daily observations about temperature, cloud cover and rain totals through measurement protocols developed by GLOBE scientists. The recorded information is then sent to the GLOBE headquarters where scientists use it to track environmental trends. Seniors act as mentors to the children and are able to record and provide information consistently for GLOBE scientists even when schools are not in session and children are unavailable to participate. The GLOBE program is in over 7,400 schools in over 80 countries. While senior citizens currently participate at only a few sites, this model could be expanded to other locations.

In St. Paul, Minnesota, youth from local schools and older adults from RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) learned about the poor water quality of a local lake and decided to do something about it. In order to improve it, they conducted research and hands-on learning activities to find out more about the watershed issues. Environmental organizations assisted in educating the teams on bio-diversity and the role of plants in water quality control. The intergenerational teams worked to educate the broader community by creating and performing plays to schools, parents, and neighborhood residents; distributing information door to door; and installing billboards which alerted commuters and residents about the issues.

The University of New Mexico School of Law's Wild Friends program engages younger and older people in protecting wild life through legislative advocacy projects. Through this program senior mentors and children have engaged in efforts to protect wildlife and our natural resources. Wild Friends student-initiated legislation has helped pass over ten pieces of legislation in the New Mexico legislature over the past ten years, including legislation to help eliminate animal poaching and preserve natural resources for future generations.

On June 21, 2003, communities across America will come together for JOIN HANDS DAY, a national event that unites young people and adults in an effort to make their neighborhoods better. JOIN HANDS DAY is an annual national day of service that calls all Americans, to reach across generations and work with new friends in identifying and fixing problem conditions in local communities. Past JOIN HANDS DAY projects have engaged young and old to remove trash from the streets, repair playground equipment, and plant trees in their neighborhoods. In Grand Rapids, Michigan JOIN HANDS DAY volunteers removed lead-based paint from the exterior of a family home, primed and repainted it. This project was chosen because the family, forced to move out when they learned their youngest child was diagnosed with lead poisoning, was unable to pay to have the work done. By engaging community members and bringing the project to the attention of the media, not only did the project help one specific family, it also raised awareness of the dangers of lead-based paint to the larger community.

Through the generous support of EPA's Office of Water, The National Source Water Protection Youth Project, a program by EASI (Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement), trains senior volunteers to teach youth groups such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to protect the environment. Additionally EASI's Children's Environmental Health Program engages older Americans to educate their communities on environmental hazards that negatively impact the health of children in the community. Through the program, Senior Environmental Corps from

Pennsylvania to Montana are beginning their work with children in local schools and community groups, educating them about a variety of factors and habits that can negatively impact their health, while offering ways to avoid these hazards and hazardous behaviors.

At James Madison University (JMU), the Adult Health and Development Program (ADHP) partners adults 50 and older with trained JMU students who encourage the older adults to engage in activities which positively affect their health, well-being, physical fitness, and health knowledge. Participants engage weekly in activities focused on personal wellness while building intergenerational connections. Initiated at the University of Maryland, the AHDP model, has been replicated at JMU and other universities throughout the country and could be adapted to include content on environmental health and advocacy.

Promoting Environmental Action Among Older Adults

Expanding the number of older adults and their level of involvement in preserving the environment requires:

- The provision of meaningful opportunities that match the skills of potential volunteers with appropriate activities,
- Education on the value and impact of their contribution, and
- Basic incentives and support to make volunteering possible for low-income volunteers who might otherwise be unable.

A recent study by Civic Ventures and Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning revealed that older people seek volunteer opportunities that are meaningful, clearly give back to the community, and encourage older volunteers to work as a team or as part of a larger coordinated movement (2002). Additional studies reveal that working with children is most often identified as the most appealing volunteer activity among older adults. (Civic Ventures, 2002). Therefore, older adult environmental volunteerism recruitment efforts can be enhanced by creating and highlighting meaningful opportunities to engage older adults in environmental activities that involve children such as intergenerational mentoring programs that unite groups of seniors and younger people to do team projects.

Research indicates that older adults are more likely to be motivated to participate in community projects when they are involved in all stages of development of the projects and are able to make decisions regarding activities. Furthermore, activities should clearly be designed to address a real community need, so that the older and younger volunteers recognize that their contribution is valuable and necessary (Generations United, 2002).

Volunteer opportunities should be designed so that they appropriately tap into the wealth of skills that older adults have to offer. Older adults with specific relevant

skills should be matched with volunteer opportunities that utilize these skills. For example, directing a retired marine biologist to help clean up garbage on a single neighborhood block, not only fails to utilize valuable skills, but may be insulting to the volunteer and might discourage him/her from participating. Such an individual might be better suited to teach children about the importance of protecting our coastal waters and help develop relevant programs.

Finally, support should be made available to both make it possible and provide incentives for older adults to volunteer. The Foster Grandparent Program, for example, provides a stipend for older adult volunteers who provide one-on-one support to children with special needs. For many low-income adults, such volunteering would not be possible without the modest stipend which helps cover the cost of transportation and other expenses associated with their volunteer experience. For other older adults, education vouchers to help pay for the education of their grandchildren, or lifelong learning opportunities for themselves, may provide the incentive to volunteer with environmental projects. A recent study of older adults indicates that more than half (52 percent) believe that the government should do more to fund programs that provide volunteer and community involvement opportunities for older adults (Civic Ventures, 2002). Intergenerational environmental programs supported through the EPA could meet the interest of such individuals.

Older Adults as Mentors for Environmental Action

Intergenerational mentoring programs have proven successful in building relationships between young and old and providing youth with extra attention, guidance, and support. There are numerous ways to facilitate older adults as mentors for environmental action. Older adult environmental and advocacy groups could partner with children's environmental groups and science classes. Partnerships could be easily developed among groups with similar interests and beliefs. In addition, older adults could partner with groups serving children that have high risk factors. Many of the children who are served by traditional mentoring programs also are at risk of environmental hazards such as asthma, sun safety, lead poisoning prevention, and poison prevention.

There are some programs around the country where older adults are mentoring youth to take action on critical community issues. In Miami, Florida, the Intergenerational Citizens Action Forum is a successful multi-generational project where older adults serve as mentors to high school students and help them to organize and conduct a town meeting or a more formally structured forum on issues important to every citizen, such as environmental protection, Social Security reform, crime, violence, and health care reform. With the help of older adult mentors, the students study the issue in depth, invite a panel with expertise on the issues to present at the forum, and pose questions to them before an intergenerational audience. Everyone present has the opportunity to hear a range of opinions and reasoned debate. After studying the issues and

hearing discussions, the Intergenerational Citizens Action Forum enables students to take the next step – to search for solutions to community problems and to publicly advocate for change through the legislative process. In the past years, students and their elder mentors formed caucuses, wrote bills, and contacted legislators, in the time-honored democratic tradition.

Evaluated Intergenerational Environmental Programs that Work

A review of literature reveals relatively few formal evaluations of intergenerational programs, however limited existing research indicates the value and effectiveness of such programs.

A recent evaluation of a pilot intergenerational environmental project in State College, Pennsylvania provides empirical data that demonstrates the unique effectiveness of intergenerational environmental projects. The Intergenerational Outdoor School, developed jointly by Shaver's Creek Environmental Center and Penn State University Cooperative Extension, is designed to demonstrate how senior adults can contribute to student learning in outdoor education programs. Twenty senior volunteers, along with 160 5th and 6th graders, participated in the weeklong Outdoor School. The senior volunteers took part in a series of environmental education activities for two out of the four weeks of the Fall 2002 I.O.S. program. The senior volunteers served as co-teachers, co-leaders and role models. Research results show that the students in the intergenerational groups gained better attitudes toward the environment than the students in the mono-generational groups. (Liu, 2003)

Programs like Wild Friends, which have successfully passed state level legislation to help protect wild life and resources also demonstrate the potential for the success of the collaborative efforts of younger and older advocates. Furthermore, positive evaluations of EASI's The National Source Water Protection Youth Project indicate its success and have led it its replication in nearly 40 communities.

While these examples and anecdotal information illustrate the effectiveness of environmental intergenerational programs, further research and evaluation of intergenerational programs would help identify the most effective models of intergenerational environmental programs in order to guide replication efforts.

Barriers to Intergenerational Environmental Programs

The following are the most significant barriers to the development of intergenerational environmental programs:

- **Demonstrations:** There is a need for demonstration programs to develop and test innovative intergenerational environmental program models that could be replicated across the country.

- **Information:** Although there is growing interest in starting intergenerational environmental programs, there is no central clearinghouse for information on program models.
- **Research:** Little research has been done on intergenerational environmental programs, and therefore limited information is available on research-based best practices for these programs.
- **Training and Technical Assistance:** Although there are individuals and organizations with expertise in developing intergenerational environmental programs, currently they are not being used to provide coordinated training and technical assistance to those interested in developing or enhancing programs.
- **Funding:** There is a lack of available information about potential funding sources in addition to limited funding currently available for environmental intergenerational programs.

Recommendations

GU recommends the EPA work with existing national and community-based organizations to:

- Create a database of model intergenerational environmental programs. Generations United's existing on-line database could serve as a clearinghouse for such programs.
- Develop materials, conferences, and training opportunities to provide "how-to" information and share program practices.
- Provide critical technical assistance to groups and individuals interested in starting or strengthening intergenerational environmental programs.

In addition GU recommends the EPA:

- Include intergenerational language in requests for proposals, applications, and policy guidelines. Use intergenerational examples in publications and on websites.
- Establish incentives in intergenerational environmental program funding that requires a research component.
- Provide funding for demonstration projects that could test innovative, replicable intergenerational environmental programs and include an evaluation component

Conclusion

Protecting our older persons from environmental hazards is important. However, we must also recognize the important role that when asked, they can and will play in protecting the communities they call home. Intergenerational strategies require that our society's bookend generations-the youngest and the oldest-be viewed as vital assets today and not simply as yesterday's heroes and tomorrow's potential. We at Generations United believe that together they can enhance the environment for all generations living and still to come.

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