

## Maine Policy Review

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Volume 24

Issue 2 Aging

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2015

# Never Too Old to Lead: Activating Leadership among Maine's Older Adults

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### Recommended Citation

Crittenden, Jennifer A. , and Lelia DeAndrade. "Never Too Old to Lead: Activating Leadership among Maine's Older Adults." *Maine Policy Review* 24.2 (2015) : 80 -85, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol24/iss2/19>.

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# Never Too Old to Lead:

## Activating Leadership Among Maine's Older Adults

by Jennifer A. Crittenden and Lelia DeAndrade

*Jennifer A. Crittenden and Lelia DeAndrade review strategies for developing and engaging leadership among older adults. They use an example from a Maine-based program to illustrate how programming can effectively foster leadership and community engagement in this population.*

Although the field of leadership development is growing, there is a dearth of programming that focuses on the development of leadership among older adults. This is especially surprising given that older adults are among the fastest-growing age segments of our population. Moreover, baby boomers have not only continued to challenge the idea that aging necessitates the end of work and community engagement, but they have also helped call attention to opportunities for tapping the strengths of this population. In this article, we review strategies for developing and engaging leadership among older adults using an example from a Maine-based program to illustrate how leadership programming can effectively support older adults while fostering leadership and community engagement. As the current population of baby boomers pushes the definitions and boundaries of the time once considered to be retirement, new possibilities emerge for tapping the strengths of this population.

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### AN AGING MAINE

Maine, like other states in the country, is experiencing a rapid growth in its older adult population. Maine currently has the largest baby boomer population in country, surpassing Vermont and New Hampshire, with nearly a third of its population comprised of baby boomers (Rector 2013). In addition, 18 percent of Maine's population is age 65 or older, as compared to 14 percent nationally (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/23000.html>). Maine's aging population has been positioned as a crisis rather than an opportunity to harness the collective power of older adults to solve pressing economic and community issues. The ability

of Maine as a state to leverage this potential lies in its ability to create access to leadership-development opportunities and pathways for older adults. Maine is poised to strengthen leadership opportunities for older adults given its established network of formal leadership-development programs and its growing cohort of baby boomers and older adults.

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### LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

While they may vary somewhat, definitions of leadership usually refer to an ability to influence others to achieve a given goal. For our work, we expand the definition to include influencing and/or mobilizing people and resources to achieve a positive effect. Defined in this way, leadership is the capacity to put community assets to work. As such, leadership is absolutely critical to developing thriving and sustainable communities; without it, the value of other community assets can't be fully actualized or realized. To be clear, we are not referring here to leaders, those formal roles or positions of authority within a community. Obviously, the value of roles can be quite variable within a community, and thus their importance as a community asset must vary as well. Leadership, although it is a concept that is frequently confounded with leaders, has a distinct meaning and value to community development.

Opportunities for leadership development emerge throughout the lifespan and are often tied to context and life milestones. For example, young adult and midlife leadership opportunities often present themselves through work, social avenues, or school-based volunteering connected with children in the household.

In later life, leadership-development opportunities traditionally exist within work settings, associations or civic groups, community service, and participation in local and state politics (Work Group for Community Health and Development 2014).

Formal opportunities for leadership development offered through organizational or programmatic contexts, specifically through community-based, not-for-profit programs, have grown tremendously in their popularity since the 1990s and have been the subject of considerable research. The goal of community leadership programs often is to foster critical thinking in the public domain and develop new and effective approaches to civic challenges (Reed 1996). Such programs have a consistently positive impact on participants and are generally effective in improving leaders' skills, understanding, and self-image and also increase civic engagement and networking among community leaders. For example, research has found that program alumni tend to stay active in their communities, often become mentors to others and help those individuals to become more involved and take on leadership roles (Bass and Bass 2008).

### *Core Leadership Competencies*

Arguably the most important of all skills or competencies developed through these programs is an understanding of leadership as a dynamic set of capacities not tied to a specific position. In other words, programs should emphasize that leadership is a constantly evolving collection of interrelated capacities or skills that are employed or engaged by the actor despite the specific expectations of his or her role.

Among the other most common core competencies or characteristics that leadership programs should develop are

- Critical-thinking skills including the ability to assemble and integrate multiple concepts and the ability to understand and recognize value positions and varying perspectives and their influence on perceptions of reality
- Communication skills such as active listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution, as well as the ability to recognize the need for, and to adopt, varying communication styles according to social settings (Barsh, Cranston, and Craske, 2008)
- Self-awareness, which refers to the ability to assess one's own positions, skills, and perspectives

- Adaptability or responsiveness to changing contexts including the ability to view goals as aspirational and not fixed or definitive (Gurdjian, Halbeisen, and Lane, 2014)
- Understanding of various leadership styles

### *Core Program Structures*

At the core of recommendations about program-delivery methods and structures is the notion that leadership-development programs should be focused on developing social and critical-thinking skills. In other words, leadership-development programs should focus on supporting the growth of a base of adaptive skills or capacities. Effective programs also include an emphasis on developing cohesive networks. Programs should engage groups of participants who cross demographic, sector, and geographic boundaries and should include activities and supports that help participants to build active and reciprocal relationships based on a high degree of trust. Supportive relationships offer opportunities to practice taking risks and sharing vulnerability. This by extension builds trust and cohesion and provides a foundation for effective networks. Such networks increase leaders' sense of belonging, shape their thinking, and provide access to varied resources during and after the program (Bass and Bass 2008; Barsh, Cranston, and Craske 2008).

Finally, leadership development programs should use a blend of traditional classroom instruction, coaching, and experiential learning. Real-life practice or experiential learning emphasizes learning through application and practice. Learners gather information through their experiences, reflect, test ideas, and assimilate information. This learn-by-doing approach helps the participants to more fully understand and adopt knowledge and skills. Programs support an experiential-learning approach to leadership development by helping participants to identify strengths and then putting them to work to inspire others for a particular cause. They may also require participants to work on real community or organizational challenges and recommend solutions (Gurdjian, Halbeisen, and Lane 2014).

### *Leadership Development among Older Adults*

Traditional approaches to community-engagement and leadership-development programming for older adults rely on lifelong-learning models or agency-driven volunteer work. These programs are not designed to

develop leadership skills among older adults or engage them in leadership at the community level. More formal models have been developed through the National Council on Aging such as the RespectAbility initiative and the Wisdom Works Teams model, which seek to help business, nonprofits, and programs to create the infrastructure necessary to engage older adults as leaders and change agents. Such initiatives have traditionally focused on building institutional, rather than individual, leadership capacity among older adults.

## Leadership in the context of volunteer work allows older adults the opportunity for personal growth and leads to overall health.

To address this gap, models of leadership-based programming and initiatives for older adults are cropping up across the country. These programs use volunteerism as a context for leadership development, an approach that aligns with the myriad of theories that emphasize engagement and activity as a facilitator of productive aging. Using this paradigm, volunteerism allows older adults to remain healthy by maintaining their social connections and increasing levels of well-being and life satisfaction overall. Leadership in the context of volunteer work allows older adults the opportunity for personal growth and leads to overall health.

An example of such programming can be found within the Third Age initiative developed in Hartford, Connecticut, that engages older adults in action-learning leadership training. Cohorts of older adults receive training and support that they then apply to team-driven projects such as improving neighborhood quality, providing voter education, and offering juvenile offender rehabilitation. Program participants report improved leadership effectiveness, and nearly all participants who complete the training sequence have launched into new leadership activities as a result of their involvement in Third Age (Hentschel and Eisen 2002).

### *ENCORPS Model*

An innovative Maine-based program for older adult leadership, Encore Leadership Corps (ENCORPS), was

developed in 2009 by the University of Maine Center on Aging in collaboration with the Maine Community Foundation and through funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Atlantic Philanthropies. The goal of the program is to engage Mainers 50 and older in community-based leadership through volunteer projects. ENCORPS members undertake self-driven projects in their communities that are often carried out outside of the confines of an umbrella organization. Volunteer roles vary widely, but include general themes such as serving on local committees, boards, and town councils; revitalizing and developing downtowns; preserving, protecting, and improving public and outdoor areas; working on food security with food pantries and community gardens; and educating community members about important health and environmental issues.

The program focuses less on matching individuals to volunteer opportunities (a service offered by a variety of existing programs) and more on leadership training and support to older adults already inclined to volunteer. The program model consists of regular workshops, trainings, and networking sessions that bring older adults from throughout Maine together to learn from expert trainers and from each other. Trainings and supports are uniquely focused on supporting older adults within a community-based, rather than an employment-based, leadership context. The growing ranks of ENCORPS volunteers, currently over 250 from across Maine, indicates that older Mainers desire the opportunity for leadership development and enjoy expressing their own leadership through self-driven projects.

Interviews and surveys conducted with ENCORPS members reveal the reasons why older Mainers are drawn to leadership opportunities, along with the barriers to pursuing further leadership development. When asked what draws them to their civic duties and leadership roles, ENCORPS participants note internal factors such as commitment to community, interest in learning new skills and pursuing personal development, desire to share their experiences and expertise with others, and drive to be a part of something meaningful. The external factors that activate leadership for ENCORPS members include being offered the opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity, having personal capacity for volunteer work, and generating enthusiasm and motivation in those around them (Wihry et al. 2013).

How do older adults view their leadership? Based on information gathered from ENCORPS participants,

older adults see themselves as providing leadership when they take initiative, listen, and facilitate interactions with others. What keeps older adults from volunteering their time largely stems from a lack of comfort with leadership roles (see sidebar for more information). Programs offered to older adults, whether they are currently volunteering or not, can provide valuable assistance in increasing comfort with volunteer roles. Interestingly, a lack of time was also noted as a barrier to leadership, an important reminder that older adults are increasingly filling their time with work, family, and community obligations. Leadership activation must take into account the time and energy available for community-based volunteering and create personal benefits that bleed across familial, work, and community roles.

Collectively, ENCorps members have added an estimated \$3.7 million of value back to Maine communities through their volunteer work. Their projects have resulted in tens of thousands of additional dollars raised directly for nonprofits and initiatives that benefit the community,

#### Older Adults' Perceptions of Leadership

ENCorps members define the characteristics that make them community leaders or not. Characteristics of a leader:

- Takes action, initiates contact
- Attracts followers
- Genuine passion for the cause
- Listens to others
- Searches out information
- Willingness to work with different personalities
- Leads by example
- Sees the big picture

Barriers to being a leader:

- Lack of time
- Can't bring self to take the first step
- Don't want to be the one to speak up
- Preference for serving as a helper

(Source: Wihry et al. 2013)

increased educational resources that are developed through their efforts, and increased knowledge and capacity of community members who have been trained or supported by ENCorps members. On a personal level, ENCorps participants have reported growth in social connections, emotional and physical well-being, and an increased sense of confidence in their leadership abilities (University of Maine Center on Aging 2013). All of these findings are consistent with the productive aging perspective that leadership-based volunteerism results in community and personal dividends.

Some examples of how ENCorps develops leadership among older adults include the following core principles:

- **Leadership as a dynamic set of competencies**—Training is transferable across settings and issues of interest. Environmental volunteers learn alongside older adults interested in health-related volunteerism and downtown revitalization. Participants learn the same skills, but are supported in translating those skills to different contexts. Training is designed to plant seeds rather than be prescriptive in its approach.
- **Critical-thinking skills**—At the core of the annual summit gathering for ENCorps participants is content that provides an overview of Maine's pressing economic, community, and health-related issues. Local and national experts provide food for thought to help participants to connect and shape their on-the-ground-work to a bigger picture. Small-group work helps participants to formulate their own local solutions and approaches to addressing Maine's challenges.
- **Core communications and relationship-building competencies**—ENCorps workshops have included sessions on how to collaborate with others, active listening, conflict management, group facilitation, problem solving, critical thinking, and communications strategies. These sessions provide time to practice and reflect on these skills as they are developed.
- **Self-awareness**—Training sessions were held to help ENCorps members to identify strengths, interests, and areas for personal growth. For example, a workshop and one-on-one follow-up with a consultant was offered to help participants to identify their personal passions and use that

assessment as a basis for prioritizing their leadership and self-development work. Participants have also engaged in workshops that help them to identify their learning and communications styles and foster a sense of awareness of how those styles may differ from those of their community partners.


- **Adaptability or responsiveness to changing contexts**—In recent years, ENCorps programming has been offered to help members to learn about new contexts and relevant issues to Maine and develop timely skills. For example, ENCorps recently completed a special initiative on food security, which aimed to educate and mobilize members around the pressing issue of hunger and food access. All participants were encouraged to integrate what they learned about food insecurity into their local work, regardless of its current focus. An additional initiative focused on helping members to learn new media techniques for sharing their volunteer work.

Additional tenets threaded throughout ENCorps programming:

- **Building strong networks**—engaging participants from a range of interests and personal backgrounds.
- **Providing opportunities for deep sharing and peer learning**—using formal classroom-style learning mixed with structured interactions, support from a staff coordinator, and a peer network.
- **Use of leadership in context**—learning activities centered around leadership to achieve a particular end focused on project, community challenges, and statewide issues of importance.
- **Fostering individual development**—exercising skills and capacities independent of formal positions participants may hold, not limited by positions as volunteers.
- **An emphasis on deep, participant-driven learning**—identifying skills/capacities needed; learning based on self-identified needs.

## SUMMARY

Leadership capacity is a critical need within Maine communities, but little attention has been given to how to effectively develop leadership programs for older adults who have the interest, skills, and commitment for effective leadership. Leadership development in the context of volunteer work offers a promising model for developing leadership skills among older adults in Maine where we have an abundance both of older adults and community issues to be addressed.

The ENCorps program provides an example of how traditional leadership competencies and approaches can be tailored to older adults in a volunteer context. Programs that seek to effectively engage this population should focus on blending best practices in leadership and approaches that engage older adults in meaningful and effective ways by focusing on current issues that are community based and of personal interest. 

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Photo by Adam Kuykendall

*ENCORPS volunteer Lynn DeGrenier with Orono Bog Boardwalk director Jim Bird. Lynn has helped raise thousands of dollars in funds for the boardwalk by supporting their annual yard sale event.*



Photo by Heather Corey

*ENCORPS group photo.*