

# INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY HEALTH CARE



When Rose Community Foundation started down the path toward Boomers Leading Change in Health in 2006, no one could have imagined how far it would go—much less what it would achieve—in just seven years. In 2006, the leading edge of the baby boom generation was just reaching their 60s. Many had well-funded retirement accounts and were exploring the possibility of early retirement. Asked how they planned to spend the next phase of their lives, half of adults age 55 and older in metro Denver, where the Foundation invests, said they expected to continue working full- or part-time, 75 percent said they would devote more time to volunteering, and two-thirds said they hoped to pursue opportunities to keep learning.

When asked to identify the single most important issue of concern to them at that time, individuals—regardless of gender, marital status, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or any other demographic characteristic—named one subject more than any other: health care. Denver’s baby boomers worried not only about how health care affected them personally, but also how it was affecting the broader community.

Fast-forward seven years, and much has changed. Americans have weathered a major, protracted recession, with effects on retirement savings and the job market that are still being felt. Home values have declined and personal debt has increased. And health care reform promises to further change the financial landscape. Many people near or at retirement age have been forced to reconsider the next chapters of their lives. Some who once planned to devote more time to volunteer work, now need to keep or find paid employment out of financial necessity. As a means of adding deeper meaning to their lives, many are pursuing job opportunities that have greater purpose, such as work in education, civil service, and health care. The concept of the “encore career” is taking on greater significance.

With these many factors in mind, Rose Community Foundation created Boomers Leading Change in Health—a groundbreaking, grassroots initiative that is tapping the deep pool of talent, time, and energy of adults 50+. With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies’ Community Experience Partnership, as well as from several Colorado-based funders, Boomers Leading Change in Health was launched to achieve two goals: engage adults age 50 and older who want to learn more about and get involved in changing health care for the Denver community, and build the capacity of organizations to use boomers in existing programs that promote access to quality health care.

## AT-A-GLANCE

### DENVER’S BOOMERS LEADING CHANGE IN HEALTH INITIATIVE

#### COMMUNITY ISSUE

Increasing access to quality health care

#### COLLABORATORS

Rose Community Foundation

Denver Health Community Voices

University of Colorado-Denver School of Public Health

Colorado Consumer Health Initiative

Central Colorado Area Health Education Center

Serve Colorado

JVA Consulting, LLC

20 host sites, including health care institutions and culturally specific community-based organizations

Other regional and local funders, including Bright Mountain Foundation, Caring for Colorado, Colorado Health Foundation, Connect for Health, The Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Colorado, and AmeriCorps host sites

#### GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Denver, Colorado, metro area (seven counties)

Total population = 2.9 million

50+ population = 869,000 (30%)

#### RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

31,000+ medically underserved individuals and families assisted

560 adults 50+ engaged through outreach and education efforts

186 adults 50+ trained and placed as volunteer patient navigators/community health workers

60 adults 50+ trained and placed as health care policy advocates

76 adults 55+ trained and placed as AmeriCorps Encore members

\$3.1 million in funding generated

Barriers to care decreased and hospital readmission rates reduced

Access to services and resources, primary care treatment, enrollment in insurance, health education outreach, and use of health screenings increased

## Mobilizing Boomers to Tackle a Community Need

With a large, well-educated 50+ population, Denver offers an exceptional laboratory for innovative and creative approaches to aging. The seven-county metro Denver area boasts one of the highest concentrations of baby boomers of any major U.S. city—more than 500,000 between the ages of 50 and 64, as of 2012. By 2030, the area's population of adults in their so-called third age (following youth and middle age) will grow to an estimated 1.3 million.

Aging has long been one of Rose Community Foundation's priority areas for investment. In 2007, with the first wave of baby boomers reaching retirement age, the Foundation took a fresh look at that population—not as consumers of services, but as a highly valuable source of knowledge and lifelong experience. “We were having a lot of people who were 50+ and were retiring,” explains Senior Program Officer, Therese Ellery, “And they were coming to the Foundation saying, ‘I want to do something different with my life. I want to do something with meaning and with purpose.’ We were trying to really figure out how we could harness this energy.”

The Foundation embarked on an intensive, 18-month phase of convening, planning, and piloting potential projects. Ultimately, collaborators identified health care access for the entire community as an issue where boomers could make a meaningful and unique contribution, and about which they cared deeply. Program planners focused on three distinct strategies, each intended to increase access to quality health care as well as patient satisfaction. Since formally launching in 2010, Boomers Leading Change in Health has recruited, screened, matched, trained, and placed adults 50+ in three types of positions:

- **Patient navigators** assist individuals and families as they move through health care systems, helping them overcome barriers to care and make use of available support and resources.
- **Community health workers** operate on the ground in communities to provide information and education about relevant health care issues, including health maintenance, chronic disease management, how to access appropriate screenings, and other preventive resources.
- **Policy advocates** strengthen the consumer voice in discussions about health care system reforms and public policy.

On an individual, personal basis, many boomers already have experience moving through the health care system themselves or on behalf of their aging parents or families. They are well-prepared to lend their knowledge and skills to help others in their communities, and to advocate for policies that lead to better and more cost-effective health outcomes.

## Working at the Community Level

To help implement the initiative, Boomers Leading Change in Health initially deployed volunteers aged 50+ to help six community partners build their capacity to serve. The partners included health care institutions and community-based organizations that worked with culturally specific communities (e.g., African Americans, refugees), low-income individuals

and families, and other vulnerable and medically underserved populations. All of these organizations had existing patient navigator, community health worker, or policy advocacy programs with which Boomers Leading Change in Health was able to align. By the third year, 20 community-based partners were participating, ten of which were AmeriCorps Encore Project host sites. (AmeriCorps Encore members are adults 55+ who receive a modest living allowance and an education award—transferable to a child, foster child, or grandchild—in exchange for their service to the community.)



## Successfully Engaging Denver's Boomer Population

Boomers Leading Change in Health has developed a number of practices they credit with helping them recruit and retain great boomer volunteers. Although many of these practices are relevant for working with volunteers of all ages, they have unique implications when working with adults 50+.

- **Provide meaningful experiences.** Partner organizations are most successful when they engage volunteers in areas where they can make a clear, valuable difference. Boomers have busy lives and many obligations; therefore, feeling engaged in meaningful work is critical to ongoing participation.
- **Create a flexible experience.** Experienced adults feel passionate about their service, but must be able to fit it into their schedules. Volunteers appreciate varied opportunities, and a willingness to adjust placements as necessary.
- **Leverage existing experience and expertise.** Boomers bring tangible skills and invaluable life experience to their service. In leveraging existing talents, adults 50+ take greater ownership of projects and the experience is more satisfying for everyone involved.
- **Demonstrate appreciation of volunteer contributions.** Volunteers are motivated by feeling appreciated and recognized, both by partner organizations and the community members they serve.

**“Baby boomers have always wanted meaning and purpose in their lives, and to change the world for the better. And they have. The question is, will they do it again as they age? In Denver, we are counting on it.”**—Therese Ellery, Rose Community Foundation

Boomer participants are matched to partner sites based on their abilities and availability. According to Barbara Raynor, the managing director of Boomers Leading Change in Health, adults 50+ often need or want more flexibility than a traditional model of volunteering might allow. “Some of our volunteers like structure. And then we have people who say, ‘I can’t commit 9 a.m. to noon every single Monday.’ So we’ve tried to provide volunteer opportunities that meet a variety of needs.”

Adults who bring a lifetime of real-world experience also gravitate to roles that align with their interests and talents. In Denver’s Bhutanese refugee enclave, for example, a boomer volunteer leads weekly health literacy classes with immigrant parents and their children. Activities focus on the development of children’s mental and physical health by promoting hygiene, physical activity, nutrition, and education. In this case, the partner organization worked with the volunteer to develop a project that advanced their mission objectives while aligning with her knowledge and fulfilling her desire to take a leadership role. This approach often looks quite different from traditional volunteering, but the rewards for participants—and benefits for community-based organizations—can be much greater.

### **Engaging and Supporting Boomer-Aged Participants**

Prospective boomer volunteers learn about the initiative through word-of-mouth outreach, web and electronic communications, and traditional marketing methods. There is a monthly e-newsletter, a presence on Facebook and Twitter, and posted information on local and national volunteer recruitment websites. According to Raynor, one of the most valuable recruiting tools has been traditional media; an article in the newspaper in 2011 was particularly fruitful. “To this day, we still have people who contact us and say, ‘I read about you in the *Denver Post*,’” she remarks. In fact, the organization sees an increase in inquiries whenever they have media coverage, which is why they have made intentional investments in public relations. “One of the things that has held true,” notes Raynor, “is that you really need a sufficient marketing budget to support the launch of a new initiative.” In addition to recruiting boomer volunteers, they have had to build awareness for Boomers Leading Change in Health.

Over the course of the first three years, collaborators have learned the importance of tailoring language and communications methods to more effectively speak to a variety of culturally-specific audiences. Many of today’s adults 50+, for example, do not relate to the concept of “volunteering”; the notion of “being of service” or “helping one’s community” better reflects their perspective.

Recruiting boomers is just the first step in a comprehensive process where training and ongoing support are critical. To ensure that volunteers meet the standards necessary to serve effectively as navigators and health workers, the Foundation

engaged the Denver Health Foundation, in conjunction with the University of Colorado-Denver School of Public Health, to create an assessment tool. Based on volunteers’ responses to scenarios they might encounter during their service, the tool helps Boomers Leading Change in Health determine which participants are suited for navigator or health worker roles. More importantly, before being placed with partner organizations, participants go through a 30-hour training that addresses a variety of topics related to overcoming barriers to care, boundary-setting, privacy laws, social determinants of health, cultural competency, and effective communications. Volunteers destined for policy work, meanwhile, go through a ten-hour “Advocacy Academy” on topics related to health care policy, including the Affordable Care Act, public speaking, grassroots organizing, and citizen lobbying.

The training curricula have been customized to meet the needs of boomer volunteers, as has the delivery of these trainings. Many volunteers who want to do policy-related work are still employed full time, so those trainings are frequently scheduled in evenings. The navigator and community health worker trainings, on the other hand, are offered at a variety of times over the course of the year in order to accommodate the diverse needs of boomer volunteers. Significantly, the training requirement of up to 30 hours has not been a deterrent—a reflection of the deep commitment adults 50+ are willing to make when they are invited to apply their talents to an issue they care about.

### **Planning for Long-Term Sustainability**

Rose Community Foundation always viewed Boomers Leading Change in Health as the underpinning for a long-term strategy that mobilizes adults 50+ to create community change. Access to quality health care has been the first arena where this work has been demonstrated and refined, but going forward, there is great potential for organizing boomers and other older adults to work in numerous critical areas of community development. Today, the advisory board for the initiative—also comprised of active community members age 50 and older—is strategizing about the potential to grow beyond health care and address other needs.

To help ensure that this effort would be self-sustaining, the Foundation established Boomers Leading Change in Health as a separate entity which operates under the fiscal sponsorship of the Colorado Nonprofit Development Center. The conscious decision was made to manage the work not as a project of the Foundation, but as an independent entity with a full-time managing director. The Foundation has been clear that its financial commitment to the organization is long-term and substantial, but not indefinite. As an autonomous initiative, Boomers Leading Change in Health will have greater opportunities for fund development and long-term growth.

Today, the initiative has demonstrated an effective model for engaging adults 50+ in ways that create meaningful contributions to the broader community, as well as significant personal impact for participants. Implementation of the Affordable Care Act continues to prompt invitations to collaborate with additional organizations and agencies as this work builds a reputation for results. One partner, for example, has reported a 50 percent reduction in hospital readmission rates due to the interventions of trained Boomers Leading Change in Health volunteers and AmeriCorps Encore members. Others are tracking a wide variety of important outcomes—from expanded insurance enrollment to increased use of preventive screenings and primary care treatment. Individuals and families are better able to make appropriate use of available health resources, and the entire community benefits.

Baby boomers were always destined to change what retirement looks like—just as they have redefined every other stage of their lives. Boomers by nature are an optimistic, hopeful generation that has always believed that anything is possible. Today, metro Denver's older adults are making highly valuable, sustainable contributions to their community, showing once again that this generation is eager—and able—to change the world.

**“This can be transformational not just in how boomers age, but in how future generations approach aging and are treated as older adults.”**—Barbara Raynor, Boomers Leading Change in Health

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