



Opinion  
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National service shouldn't be just for the young.

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(Javier Jaén for The Washington Post)

Bad news that happens fast always grabs our attention — earthquakes, plane crashes, cyberattacks. But what shapes our lives more profoundly, yet often eludes our notice, is good news that happens slowly.

Few slow-moving developments are more astonishing, or consequential, than the surge in lifespans over the past century. In 1900, the typical American could expect to live only until their mid-40s. Now, that figure stretches well into the 70s. Today, an American who reaches age 65 can expect to live, on average, nearly 20 more years. Contrast that to 1900, when just 4 percent of Americans even made it to 65.

“We’ve added 30 years to average life expectancy,” Laura Carstensen, a Stanford University professor who directs the school’s Center on Longevity, told me. “That is stunning. It’s never before happened in human history.”

Yet the structure of our lives hasn’t adapted to this transformation. The standard American life story remains a three-act drama: a burst of education, a few decades of work, and then a leisurely retirement. We’ve received an extraordinary multi-decade windfall — and simply tacked it onto the end of the third act.

“We’re squandering it,” Carstensen told me. “What would life look like if we optimized the extra 30 years instead?”

And what if that optimization simultaneously addressed some of America’s most pressing public problems?

In other words, why not establish a robust national service program for people over 65?

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## Thinking bigger

The contours of such an initiative are already in place. It's called AmeriCorps Seniors, part of AmeriCorps, the federal agency that promotes service and volunteering. Each year, about 143,000 AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers, all 55 and older, serve local communities in a variety of ways: delivering food to the homebound, tutoring students, even assisting military families with their tax returns.

The program attracts people such as Murphy Smith, a 64-year-old former construction worker in Pensacola, Florida. In retirement, without a job to go to each day, "I was bored," Smith told me. "I didn't know what to do. I was going crazy." A friend connected him to the local Council on Aging, which had received an AmeriCorps grant. And for the past few years, Smith has volunteered nearly 40 hours a week helping an elderly woman with her doctor appointments, medications and groceries. It's gratifying, Smith says. "We need it as much as they do."

Talking with Smith is inspiring. Examining AmeriCorps Seniors' scope, though, can be frustrating. The program's 143,000 volunteers is a meaningful number, but it represents less than one-fourth of 1 percent of the nearly 80 million Americans over 60. AmeriCorps Seniors' annual budget is about \$235 million — not peanuts, but about what the federal government spends on Social Security every 90 minutes.

Imagine boosting the funding to the equivalent of, say, 90 *hours* of Social Security payments. That would be enough for AmeriCorps to connect nearly 8.5 million volunteers with local nonprofits meeting local needs.

If scaled wisely, a remade and expanded initiative — call it the Silver Service Corps — would deliver at least three benefits.

## Solving problems and helping the helpers

First, this freshly assembled army of seniors could address chronic challenges that, at their core, are problems of human connection. Take loneliness, which Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy has identified as a public health risk on par with smoking. Smith runs errands and makes appointments for his elderly client. But he says his most important role is "just sitting with Miss Barbara" — keeping her company and talking about what's going on in her life and in the world.

Or consider the convoluted mess that is America's child-care "system." In a country currently short a few million child-care workers, a squadron of 60- and 70-something volunteers isn't the full solution. But it would help. And the AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent program could offer the initial infrastructure.

Some volunteers might choose to build relationships through technology. Despite the stereotype that people over 65 can't connect to Zoom or manage to unmute themselves when they do, the reality is different. Most 70-year-olds, for instance, have been using the internet well over half their adult lives. That creates the opportunity for millions of virtual volunteers to tutor students in math, organize book clubs or mentor small businesses.

A second benefit of a Silver Service Corps: Helping others is good for the helpers. Volunteering and supporting others boosts psychological well-being, improves physical health and even reduces mortality, according to decades of research. A longitudinal study of AmeriCorps Seniors uncovered similar effects. “I saw people go from a wheelchair to just a cane because they were more active [from volunteering],” AmeriCorps Seniors Director Atalaya Sergi told me.

Teresa Amabile, a Harvard Business School professor and co-author of “Retiring: Creating a Life That Works for You,” says a “highly visible, popular program” could also help older Americans find their footing on the longer and trickier terrain of postretirement life. “Many people do feel the need after they retire from their professional careers to give back, to do something that’s useful and meaningful,” she told me. Even if that doesn’t morph into a full-time endeavor, it could help them detach from their working life, adopt a new structure and begin forming an identity for their later years.

## A ‘new map of life’

A final virtue of a Silver Service Corps is that it meets our political and cultural moment. The United States remains a stubbornly 50-50 country. In the past nine presidential elections, Republicans have won four and Democrats five — and no candidate from either party has exceeded 53 percent of the popular vote. A program like this appeals to the left by emphasizing care and social services. But it achieves those goals in a way that appeals to the right. AmeriCorps Seniors doesn’t operate its programs; it merely serves as a matchmaker that connects local organizations with volunteers. The federal government is the catalyst, not the boss.

Equally important, the initiative can begin to contend with the happy upheaval of longer lives. This year, a record 4.1 million Americans will turn 65. Next year will match that record. 2026 and 2027 will match it again. By 2040, nearly a quarter of the U.S. population will be over 65.

Is it really wise for them — and, eventually, for all of us — to spend decades unplugged from the needs of the country, collecting a Social Security check and dabbling in leisure? Or is it wiser to enlist them and eventually all of us in fashioning what Stanford’s Carstensen calls the “new map of life”? And might the map’s compass point toward the principle that Americans can be active contributors at every stage of life?

National service shouldn’t be the domain of 18-to-24-year-olds enlisting in the military, the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps. It can be for everyone, including those whose golden years will be longer and more golden than any humans in history.