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## VIEW POINT

**How can we better harness the energy and talents of older people in our communities?**

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**Caitlin E. Coyle**

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Every day, we are bombarded with disheartening news stories and faced with issues causing us worry. This constant barrage can create feelings of helplessness or even callousness toward the people and systems around us.

One way to combat this negative force is to be reminded that we each can contribute to positive change in our own corners of the world. For people in mid- or later life, there is a unique compounding of life experience and time flexibility that creates a rich resource for families and communities.

How can we ignite and enable older residents to share their assets? Creating a variety of opportunities is key, because people can then choose those matching their preferences. So, too, is promoting activities in which they can derive meaning from the experience, which brings authentic engagement. These can include volunteering to teach skills to others, one-on-one mentoring, storytelling, or joining a group working to

**Karen Lynch**

**President, Metro North chapter of Massachusetts Senior Action Council; Malden resident**

There is a wealth of experiences, skills, and interests among older people. Unfortunately, many seniors are isolated, or only spend time with immediate family.

Many seniors would love to take part in all types of activities, and the cities and towns where they live would benefit greatly from their talents, wisdom, and available time. So how do we get more seniors out into the community and involved with the wider world?

A couple of major obstacles prevent more older people from being active in their towns. One is poor communication. There are many seniors whose first language is not English. When municipalities communicate with local residents via e-mail, newspapers, and social media, it is often solely or predominantly in English. Another obstacle to communication is that many older people do not have computers or Internet service, often due to the high cost. And technology is so unfamiliar,

change. In a largely age-segregated society, involving older adults in ageless conversations and environments can make our communities more equitable.

According to the stages of adult development, we reach a point in life where we seek relationships and activities that help us "make our mark." There's also a related evolutionary motivation — called generativity — to contribute toward improving the human species. Acts of generativity contribute to one's own relationships, self-esteem, and reflections on a life well-lived, and can inspire others to similarly contribute to a sense of community.

Leaving a legacy doesn't have to involve a big action or be formally organized. Volunteering for a cause important to you, sustaining family values and relationships, and sharing your talents and experiences with others all embody this concept of leaving your mark on the world as mortality becomes more imminent.

Tapping into this human propensity to imprint the world before we exit is an excellent way to leverage the experiences, lessons, skills, and perspectives of older people. Recognizing everyday actions that enhance the community, and the simple gesture of asking people to contribute, are underrated tools in capturing the talents of our senior community members — and encouraging others to follow suit.

Sharing these intangible resources can contribute to a more sustainable society and help foster a collective goal of creating a better future.

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There are a variety of relatively simple ways we can address these communication gaps. One obvious one is to ensure that the information local governments convey to residents is available in other languages, particularly those widely spoken in the community.

Municipalities also could recruit volunteers — including young people — to offer seniors one-on-one lessons in using the Internet, or to simply help them access online information, using public computers at the local library or senior center.

Transportation is another obstacle to our older residents becoming more active in their communities. There are some free or low-cost transportation services seniors can sign up for, but many more are needed. Providing them with convenient access to affordable or free transportation would greatly improve the ability of seniors to take part in all that their city or town offers.

In my own community of Malden, there are many ways for older residents to get involved. We have Mystic Valley Elder Services, a senior center, the public library, Massachusetts Senior Action Council meetings, and local TV stations. Yet as in other communities, these opportunities remain out of reach for too many people because of inadequate transportation and communication.

Seniors have so much to offer and it is in all of our interest to make it easier for them to contribute to the vibrancy of their communities.

*As told to Globe correspondent John Laidler. To suggest a topic, please contact [laidler@globe.com](mailto:laidler@globe.com).*

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