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Aging as an Option

By

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An efficiency expert from the home office visits a plant in Maine. He sees the manager, an older New Englander, and asks him, "How many workers do you have approaching retirement?" The man answers, "Don't have any goin' the other way."

Sometimes people treat aging as if it were an option or a discretionary exercise. "Grow older?" "No, thanks. I think I'll do something else." We see this in public policy much too frequently. Policy makers, whether local, state, or federal, defer focus on the matters of aging, even when the economy is robust. Add serious economic stress to the picture and aging as a subject disappears from consideration, in plans, priorities, and budgets. Except for Social Security and Medicare. These two topics have so many proponents and opponents that they seem always in someone's cross hairs. But even here, the discussions tend to be framed in economic terms rather than those of human development.

The reality is that the citizens of Virginia, like those of most of the world, are growing older ---steadily and across all sub-groups. Growing up may be of one's own choice, but growing older is not. This imperative makes older adults an enormous resource of time and talents. Older adults present, as well, perhaps the greatest heterogeneity in human development of any age group in the life course.

Aging is neither a fad nor an option but a bedrock reality that should be constantly under consideration, especially by those charged with protecting the common good. Two positive examples of such consideration, among many, present themselves. The first is a recent, inspired initiative conceived and being launched, with the aid of dozens of others, by the Virginia Department for the Aging: the Commonwealth's *Four-Year Plan for Aging Services*. VDA Commissioner Nablo discusses it in her editorial in this issue. The second is the work of colleagues at the Virginia Center on Aging, which I had cause to review recently and for which I gained a new appreciation.

The *Four-Year Plan* just launched by the Virginia Department for the Aging opens by recognizing that it no longer makes sense to talk about older Virginians as "them" but rather as "us." (The same insight would be true in Texas or New York or most anywhere in the developed world.) The Plan puts into operation an awareness that we all will likely grow older, that we do so in idiosyncratic fashion and become more ourselves and less like our age-mates in many ways, that older adults present a continuum of skills, capacities, knowledge, and needs; and that response to this wondrous array of us should take the form of assisted autonomy, helping each to make the most of his or her "self."

So, in practice, we Virginians should focus on stimulating mental growth among elders through lifelong learning; community, continuing, and adult education; higher education; and other opportunities, formal and informal, that cultivate such growth. We should

recognize and redress the staggering shortfall in geriatric training, a dilemma recently examined by Dr. Dick Lindsay in these pages. The numbers of health care providers trained in geriatrics is actually decreasing around us as we age in unprecedented numbers. We should be more aware of the shortage of home care providers whose visits prolong living in the community for older Virginians and adults with disabilities. Relatedly, we should develop “livable communities” that reinforce and encourage safety, health, social interactions, learning, service, work, leisure and more across the life span. Such communities would be not only “aging friendly” but also “all people friendly,” for community improvements in safety and access, for example, would benefit everyone in that community. Blueprints already exist in the Thomas Jefferson Planning District in and around Charlottesville, in Fairfax County, and elsewhere. These and like-minded actions should not fade in and out of attention as if growing older were an option.

The second positive example demonstrating a recognition that aging is here to stay is the work of colleagues at the Virginia Center on Aging. The small staff here has excelled in projects whose variety, enterprise, and accomplishments would do credit to a much larger operation. This includes funded projects on: research into mindfulness-based stress reduction for caregivers who daily cope with the challenges of caring for a loved one with dementia; identifying and strengthening the abilities of trusted members of local communities, such as clergy and lay leaders, to help those who are victims of domestic violence; confronting elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation by training law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges in proven practices; and helping to build the minds and bodies of mid-life and older adults through sustained brick-and-mortar programs in lifelong learning in several geographic locations in Virginia, and across the Commonwealth through educational outreach.

VCoA maintains partnerships with hundreds of agencies, groups, and individuals in every region of Virginia. These have helped in creative work to overcome barriers to fuller community life for older adults with lifelong, developmental disabilities. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners from Virginia’s many colleges and universities have served as volunteer reviewers, helping to secure the reputation of the Alzheimer’s and Related Diseases Research Award Fund (ARDRAF) as the nation’s most productive and cost-effective stimulus for pilot research into the causes, consequences, and treatment of dementing illnesses.

At the same time, I have discovered, in a retrospective prompted by funding cutbacks, that over the past 10 years the General Assembly has appropriated \$4.2 million cumulatively for the Virginia Center on Aging and the programs it administers, while VCoA has returned to Virginia \$19.2 million through competitive grants we have obtained, Elderhostel tuitions and discretionary spending by non-Virginia attendees, subsequent awards obtained by ARDRAF awardees made possible by the findings of their pilot research studies, and other initiatives. This translates to a stunning return on investment, by any standard.

This is a good time to remind policy makers of the ever-present reality of growing older. For the Commonwealth. For themselves. Actually, every day is a good time to remember and to act responsibly.

When I visit the primary grades to read to children from picture books containing older characters, one of the themes that I share with the children is “If You’re Lucky, You Get to Be Old.” We are and we have. We need to remember that we should not treat aging and aging-related research, training, and services as an option.