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As we consider what this country will be like with the aging of the population, we must not lose sight that it is not the bad news that we are living longer. There can be no doubt that with all of the tremendous advancements that came out of the last 100 years in medicine, communication, transportation, certainly the greatest gift of the 20th Century was that most Americans will have an additional 30 years of life. While some people have always lived into old age, we have now figured out how to get almost everyone there. We just haven't figured out what to do with them now we've got them there. Never before, in the history of the world have we had this many people live this long with so much to offer. Older adults may be America's only growing natural resource. The possibilities of harnessing this enormous talent for public good are endless and exciting.

At retirement, most folks want a break from the 5:00 a.m. alarm, traffic, and long work hours. But many wake up six months or a year later and think "Now what am I going to do for the next 20-30 years?" Many Americans will spend 25% of their lives in retirement—yet few have really thought about what they will do with this new gift of time. When you think about it, retirement for the average person is also a 20th Century phenomenon. A hundred years ago, if you did live into old age, you did not draw a line in the sand and decide you were no longer going to milk the cows. As we mostly lived in small towns and on farms, you continued to be part of your family, farm, or business.

But all of that has changed. We are now a mostly urban, mobile society where family is often many miles away. Work hours are long and hectic and then, for most, end abruptly. And unfortunately, it is not as easy as you would think to be successful in this new phase of life.

We know that for vital healthy aging we must stay physically fit, intellectually fit and perhaps most important, we must continue to have purpose and meaning in life. Many older adults want to get involved in their communities, but frequently when they look for meaningful civic engagement, they are instead given meaningless tasks. Too often, we don't value older adults for their education, experience and wisdom, and older adults are asked to stuff envelopes or other such menial tasks. Understandably they don't stay long and end up spending more and more time inactive, sitting at home watching television. Obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and depression are growing problems in the older adult population. Sadly, older adults are the segment of the population that have the highest suicide rate.

I did a ride along a few years ago with our Public Administrator's office. An elderly senior had passed away and with no family or friends to assume responsibility for the estate so our County Government stepped in. This woman had been dead for several days in her home, which was a filthy cluttered mess. Her last years had obviously not been pleasant ones and at the time of her death the place was literally a rat's nest. Somehow this woman had simply disappeared from the community. But in the midst of the mess we discovered she had been a teacher. It is heart breaking to think society didn't stay connected with her, to continue to value her talents. What a difference she could have made in a child's life, and her own, if we had found a way for her to know we still valued her, and needed her. It becomes both a tax payer burden but more importantly, a human loss.

No one wants to be put out to pasture. It's hard to get excited about staying physically and mentally fit if you have no meaningful purpose in life. We can and must do better. This is really about a different way of thinking; a paradigm shift on how we view our later years. We often need more resources to solve community problems, but those resources don't always have to be money, they could be the army of older adults we have assembled just waiting for their opportunity.

San Diego County has a population of about 3 million people and is about the size of Connecticut. We have a large metropolitan area, small towns and rural area all within the county boundary. I am here today to tell you about some of the exciting things we are doing in San Diego County to engage older adults in solving critical community problems. San Diego County, like most communities, has an abundance of single parents, and parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Consequently, many parents have less time to spend with their children. Other family support may be miles away or also working. The result is that we have more and more children that have too few caring adults in their lives. We have been finding unique ways to bring these two populations—seniors and kids—together. And we wanted older adults to help with some of the most critical community issues.

Welfare to Work: We enlisted senior mentors to help our families make a successful transition from welfare to work. For most welfare recipients getting a job was the easy part, keeping a job as a single parent, with no car, three kids and a poor support system, was the hard part. Our seniors mentored 4-5 families for the first year they were working. The older adults provided support, advice, resources and encouragement to a population that truly needed help to become self sufficient. They mentored the entire family, helped Mom find appropriate day care, open bank accounts, get kids immunized, find and use health care, monitor school attendance, attend school conferences with Mom, and anything else that came up where the family needed help and support. And perhaps the most important piece they brought was encouragement, reassurance and their determination to help these families succeed. We recruited seniors with GED's to PhD's. They came to the task with passion and commitment to help these families make it. We trained them about community resources and how to link the families to other community support. We didn't have to tell the seniors what to do, but rather just made sure they knew the outcomes we were trying to achieve. Our results were incredible. Of all of the programs we have used to help families get off and stay off welfare, this one had by far the best outcomes.

Foster kids: We have a residential high school for foster kids in San Diego—San Pasqual Academy. These are kids that are not going to be reunified with their birth parents, not going to be adopted and are shifting around the foster care system. It was a converted boarding school and opened for foster kids in 2001. We currently have 130 students. The goal was to improve the high school graduation rate (a dismal 50% national rate) and help these kids on a course of education or employment. Using our “seniors are a resource” approach, in 2003 we opened ten houses on the campus to older adults. In return for reduced rent, we asked the seniors to volunteer; their job description was “care about these kids”. We didn't match them up or tell the seniors what to do; we just made sure they knew the outcomes we were hoping to achieve for kids that have had a bad deal in life. From day one, it has been like magic. This Intergenerational program has been described as “putting the heart into the school”. These seniors do the same caring loving things any grandparent would do, and for kids that haven't had that, it truly is special. They garden, make cookies, eat dinner together, tutor, play pool and have poetry slams. San Pasqual Academy already had an 8 man football team—now they have “grandparents” on the sidelines cheering them on. The kids are thriving and the seniors truly have a reason to stay physically and mentally fit—these kids really need them.

Our high school graduation rate at San Pasqual Academy is 90% and when many of the kids that go on to college have holiday breaks, they come back and stay with the seniors.

First Five: In California, we have a special tobacco tax with revenues dedicated to help kids age 0-5 to be healthy and school ready. We know from research the critical importance of mental stimulation and physical nurturing during these early years in a child's life. In San Diego we have First Five programs in place throughout the county. Some of these sites are domestic violence shelters, transitional housing complexes. All serve low income families. In 2004 we added older adults to the mix. Seniors are given a \$225 -\$300/month stipend to cover volunteer costs and they volunteer 15 - 20 hours per week. What a tremendous fit for this army of older adults. We have retired nurses, teachers, social workers, State Department employees etc., who are teaching and loving these young children. Our first year evaluations were tremendous. Kids improved dramatically in verbal and social skills as well as marked improvement in their behavior. An extra benefit has been the parenting lessons and modeling the seniors are doing for these young, struggling parents.

Legacy Corps: Legacy Corp is an Intergenerational Respite Program where we team an older adult with a teenage foster child and together they visit a frail elderly, providing respite breaks for the caregiver. While providing this important community service, the senior mentors are helping the kids think through college and career options and help them pursue their goals. Through this experience many have been encouraged to pursue careers in the health care or social service field.

As we get the word out about the tremendous success we are having with seniors helping to solve our serious community problems, our community is learning to think differently. We are seeing "envelope stuffing" being replaced with truly meaningful opportunities.

At Vista Square Elementary, where they are addressing childhood obesity, staff noticed that kids ate healthier if there was an adult in the food line encouraging them and then sat and ate with them. But school staff did not have the time. So staff went door to door in their neighborhood inviting seniors to come to school and join the kids for lunch (School Nutrition Advocacy Program SNAP) This is a simple and easy success—we just have to think differently. Seniors are coming, kids are eating better and new friendships are being formed.

Helix High School, a Title I school with a 22% older adult population in their community started by meeting with their local senior center—they had never met. Helix was working hard with 9th graders to stay current with school work and avoid dropping out. Helix has a special tutorial period each day for all 9th graders to make sure their work is current. "Thinking" differently meant inviting "Bill", a WWII Veteran and twice widowed on campus to play chess with any 9th grader that had completed their homework.

Would 9th graders have any interest in playing chess with this 80 plus year old? On the first day, 50 kids did. And after that, Bill was there from 6:45 a.m. until noon, playing 12-15 games at a time. He taught the kids chess etiquette, manners and friendship. He was another caring adult in these kids' lives, checking in with them, knowing their name and offering advice and encouragement. And hundreds of kids knew Bill. He recently passed away but the last two years of Bill's life were filled with joy and reward. He wasn't sitting home watching TV and depressed that he was no longer needed. Those kids needed Bill. A letter from his son said "Our father used to share his personal stories and experiences at Helix High School, as well as his utter delight in forming and shaping the students through the game of chess. He was very proud of "his students" and the progress they were making in chess and in their lives."

I have listed a few of our programs; I could give you many more. And truly, if you build it, they have come. Seniors have flocked to these meaningful opportunities. And of course, everyone wins. Kids and families are doing better and the older adults involved are healthier and happier. As one senior at San Pasqual Academy told me, "I have to be my best for these kids--it really keeps me going".

Perhaps the most encouraging thing we are seeing is the systemic changes taking place in San Diego County. Helix High School now has an Intergenerational Coordinator to handle all of the seniors that are now on campus teaching cooking, sewing, quilting, knitting and many other activities. Their oral history project for all high school juniors is thriving and every year they host a huge event to honor senior veterans.

The Community College district now offers classes in Intergenerational programming. Cal State San Marcos offers a social work master degree with an Intergenerational emphasis. All First Five requests for fund proposals now include extra points for an Intergenerational approach. The SNAP program, where seniors eat with kids to encourage healthy eating habits, is expanding to schools throughout the district. San Diego County government has added development of Intergenerational Programs as a strategic goal and funds an Intergenerational Coordinator position to help support community programs. We have also moved the Intergenerational support of foster kids beyond San Pasqual Academy and into the communities where seniors not only mentor foster kids, but support foster parents and families as well.

What does it take to have successful Intergenerational Programs? They work best if they are very neighborhood or community based. They also need:

- 1) Public Policy support
- 2) A program coordinator

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- 3) A stipend or other tangible way of offsetting volunteer costs
- 4) Meaningful opportunities for seniors to use their wisdom, experience and talent
- 5) Respecting and treating the seniors as an important part of the program,
welcoming their ideas and perspective

And then, watch out! Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.