

An SSAI-Sponsored Survey of Adult Literacy Programs and Older Adults

Summary

ProLiteracy Member Programs and Older Americans: Students and Volunteers

ProLiteracy

Michele Diecuch

This report, based on a 2011 survey of ProLiteracy's member programs throughout the U.S., indicates that adults age 55 and older are a growing proportion (currently about 12%) of adult literacy students while also comprising about half of all the volunteers in these programs.

ProLiteracy is a nonprofit organization that advances adult literacy and basic education through nearly 1,000 local programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Assisting older adults to improve their literacy is especially relevant to the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), because nearly one-third of all SCSEP participants in 2010 had either low literacy skills or limited English proficiency. The ProLiteracy report's major findings are the following:

The number and proportion of older students in the surveyed adult literacy and basic education programs are increasing dramatically.

- Between 2007 and 2011 the proportion of older students doubled to 12%.
- More than nine in ten (92%) of surveyed programs serve students age 55 and older.
- Although the proportion of ProLiteracy's programs that serve older adults is increasing, only one-fourth (23%) of the programs use special methods to recruit older students and just 13% provide targeted instruction for them.
- Two-thirds (64%) of the programs work with local organizations that serve older adults.

More than one-fourth (26%) of students age 55 and older were unemployed and seeking work.

- Almost 25% of older literacy students entered the program to gain employment skills.
- Nearly 40% of older students were employed, almost two-thirds of them part-time.
- Half (51%) of the programs did not directly offer employment assistance, but 68% reported that they partner with workforce development agencies such as One-Stop centers.

English as a second language and basic literacy were the most common types of instruction.

- Older students received instruction most frequently for English as a second language (40%) and basic literacy (33%). Few (9%) received instruction for computer skills or a GED (7%).
- Most older students (78%) received instruction at least once weekly, including 41% who received it at least twice a week.

Older volunteers are a vitally important resource, used by almost 90% of surveyed programs.

- Just over half (51%) of all the surveyed programs' volunteers were age 55 or older, with an average of 46 older volunteers per program.
- Two-thirds of older volunteers were retired, 28% were employed, and 6% unemployed.
- The percentage of instructors age 60 or older rose from 35% in 2007 to 41% in 2011.

Conclusion: Adult literacy programs serve growing proportions of older adults while also relying on higher proportions of older volunteers and instructors. Enhanced coordination between adult literacy programs and SCSEP can assure that participants who have limited English proficiency or low literacy skills receive needed assistance. In addition, SCSEP participants can be a resource by working at adult literacy programs, which have growing waiting lists but limited staff.

For a PDF copy of the full report, please email your request to bharootyan@ssa-i.org.