



# GIVING BACK

HOW OLDER OHIOANS OVERCAME AGE – AND POVERTY –  
TO SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES: THE STORY OF SCSEP

For more information or to request additional copies of this report, contact:

**Senior Service America**

8403 Colesville Road

Suite 1200

Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3314

(301) 578-8900

**[www.seniorserviceamerica.org](http://www.seniorserviceamerica.org)**

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This report was produced by:  
Bob Levey, reporter and writer  
Bruce R. Strong, photographer  
Tracy Cox, graphic designer  
Ann Hurst, editor

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**Working with Head Start children puts SCSEP participant Ida Edwards ‘someplace between smiling and crying.’**

## INTRODUCTION

When Lillian Carter, mother of President Jimmy Carter, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in India at 68, she showed that age is no barrier to community service. In this report, we share the stories of older Ohioans who overcame not only age but also poverty to serve their community through the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP).



Four decades ago, the War on Poverty launched SCSEP, which some would now describe as a “civic engagement” program for low-income seniors. It has become a major program under the Older Americans Act. Last year it enabled 94,000 seniors across the nation to contribute 46 million hours working in thousands of local nonprofit and public agencies while learning new skills to equip them to re-enter the workforce.

Over the next decade, Ohio will become completely dependent on workers over 55 to generate all of the growth in its labor force. As you read this report, I invite you to consider the multiple dividends that are produced when seniors in need receive opportunities to earn, learn, and serve. I welcome your comments; email me at [tsarmiento@ssa-i.org](mailto:tsarmiento@ssa-i.org).

**Anthony R. Sarmiento**

President and Executive Director  
Senior Service America



STORY BY BOB LEVEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE STRONG

# OHIO STORY

To many Americans, Ohio is the home of apple-pie virtues and legendary accomplishment.

The first astronaut, John Glenn, grew up on a farm near Columbus. The Wright Brothers built the first successful airplane in Dayton. Only Virginia and New York have produced more presidents.

Ohio State University defines college football success. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has remade the Cleveland waterfront. At the world-famous Cleveland Clinic, doctors repair more hearts than at any other

health facility in the world.

Ohio is not entirely Eastern, not entirely Appalachian, not entirely Midwestern—it is all three. It has sophisticated cities, swanky suburbs, ethnic diversity, prosperous farms, craggy mountains, a Great Lake, a historic river.

It is America in miniature.

In the next few years, Ohio will lead the nation in an extraordinary statistic. “All of the growth in the working-age population of Ohio between 2005 and 2015 will be generated by persons 55 and older,” according to a new

study conducted by a team from Northeastern University in Boston. The study was commissioned by Senior Service America, a nonprofit organization that helps low-income older adults gain job skills and re-enter the workforce.

Are Ohio’s seniors up to the task of filling the jobs and keeping them? And just as importantly, are the state’s employers, including government agencies, ready for

older workers? Statistics suggest they are not, particularly for the neediest residents. Continued funding for the single program that assists those considered hardest to serve is in the hands of Congress and its deliberations over reauthorization of the Older Americans Act.

Nearly one in nine Ohio residents live below the federal poverty level, including many older adults, who already are having

**Smoke from factories colors dawn’s first light, reminiscent of an earlier era when industries thrived and the economy flourished.**



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It is America in miniature.

15%

Approximate percentage of Dayton residents who are 65 and older and living below the poverty line.

41%

The increase expected in the number of 'poor' and 'near poor' older adults nationwide in the next decade.

30%

The increase expected in the nation's senior population in the next decade.

trouble—and will almost certainly have more. They are often unfamiliar with computers, short on education and experience, unsure of their skills. They may have been out of the workforce for decades while raising families. They may suddenly need to work because of divorce, relocation or widowhood, and they may have no idea how to begin the search.

For more than 40 years, the federally funded Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) has provided a boost, placing low-income adults age 55 and older in participating nonprofit and public agencies, where they learn marketable skills so they can return to the workforce. They receive minimum wage for 20 hours of work a week.

Senior Service America, based in the Washington, D.C., area, is one of six national nonprofit organizations that operate SCSEP (pronounced SEE-sep) in Ohio. Last year, the

six served nearly 3,000 Ohioans, just 1 percent of those eligible. (Only programs in California, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas were larger.)

To many people involved with SCSEP—inside Ohio and out—the community service is what sets it apart. Participants work in job-training positions in libraries and after-school reading programs, health-care aide positions, food preparation programs, call-to-check-on-seniors programs, and many more. In 2005, SCSEP participants nationwide provided 46 million hours of community service.

Who are the Ohioans who benefit from SCSEP? What has the program meant to them as individuals? What has it meant to their communities? Three cities in Ohio—all very different from one another, although all three have SCSEP programs administered by Senior Service America—hold some answers.

**Dayton has become a city far older and poorer than the average in Ohio.**



Ed Fleisher offers help – and hope – in a county plagued with economic woes.

Factories and power plants, like this one along Lake Erie, are locked up tight, eerie reminders of a more prosperous era.

# Ashtabula

Ashtabula is a city where the train doesn't stop any more.

Fifty years ago, it was a regular stop on the New York Central Railroad—midway between Cleveland and Erie, Pennsylvania, in the upper right-hand corner of Ohio, alongside scenic Lake Erie. Every day, trains brought people, freight, dollars, and jobs.

But today, you can board a train only in Cleveland or Erie. Ashtabula languishes.

"It's definitely a county with problems," says Ed Fleisher, who administers the SCSEP program for Ashtabula County's Workforce Policy Board. "There's not a lot of new

industry coming here. We have fairly high unemployment and lower levels of education. The kids that get an education are gone."

But SCSEP is right there to help Ashtabula's older residents—those who want and need to work and those who want to invest time and energy in the local community. According to Fleisher, SCSEP is "the difference in whether they drive a car or get a medicine they need to take."

It's the difference for Ashtabula, too. Community organizations, like Meals on Wheels, "come to rely on us." SCSEP participants work in the food operation,

the administrative operation and the transportation operation. "Without us, they'd have a difficult time running the program."

Ashtabula is an unpretentious working-class community. Of its 20,962 residents, fewer than 20 percent hold managerial or professional jobs. Fewer than 10 households in the entire county have an income of \$200,000 or more a year.

Unemployment is 7 percent—more than 2 percent above the national average. Nearly 30 percent of employed adults hold manufacturing jobs—all of which are endangered by outsourcing and the woes of the auto industry.

Ashtabula lies 55 miles east of Cleveland. It is beginning to show the first signs of suburban sprawl. In 10 years, Fleisher believes

# \$27,354

The median household income in Ashtabula, one of the lowest in Ohio.

that Ashtabula might become part of the Cleveland metropolitan area. But for now, it is a city where the hospital is by far the largest employer, where the median household income is \$27,354 (one of the lowest such figures in Ohio), where "for whatever reason, the lives of many of these people don't add up."





**Olive Jones did so well as a tour guide trainee that she quickly won a staff position.**

Olive Jones's life is adding up better than it did nearly five years ago.

Her husband of 34 years died after an extended illness. "My husband wanted a stay-at-home wife," so Jones had not worked since the 1960s. As a young woman, she had been a billing and filing clerk for a local insurance agency. But she had "never turned on a computer" and she was wracked with doubts.

"How do you dress? How do you act? I had no idea."

Yet she didn't waste time finding out. Her husband died on August 28, 2001. "By Sept. 28, I had my interview with Ed." He placed her as a trainee with the county council on aging. She helped coordinate senior citizen trips. She did

**Without SCSEP, 'I would be sitting at home, no question about it.'**

**Olive Jones, SCSEP graduate**

so well that the council hired her full-time on its own payroll within weeks.

Jones is now 65, but she hasn't slowed down. She estimates that she has organized trips for more than 1,000 people— to casinos in Detroit, to Arizona, to shopping malls. She acts as public address announcer, sightseeing coordinator and caller for the game of Bingo

**Olive Jones shares memories from inside the old Shea's Theater, once a community landmark and popular destination.**





**Nearly a third of employed adults in Ashtabula hold manufacturing jobs, now endangered because of outsourcing and industry slowdowns.**

**Ida Edwards serves as a monitor for Head Start children. With her is Kathy Phillips, transportation coordinator and occasional bus driver.**

that seems to go on perpetually. When the bus returns to Ashtabula, “I get hugs.” She also gets \$6.35 an hour for a 40-hour week. Without SCSEP, “I would be sitting at home, no question about it.”

Jones learned about SCSEP in a way that would gladden the hearts of marketing professionals everywhere. She saw a phone number on a card. In Ohio, when you turn 60, the governor mails you a Golden Buckeye Card. It congratulates you on your landmark birthday and tells you which benefits are available to you. Jones had tossed her card into a file and forgotten all about it. But shortly after her husband’s death, she was cleaning out the file and . . . Bingo. An 800 number appears on the front of the card. It promises job guidance. Jones picked up the

phone and has never looked back.

“I will continue as long as I am mentally capable.”

Although she gets \$900 a month from Social Security (her husband put handles into sledge hammers at a local factory for his entire adult life), she needs money for a reliable car, and so she can visit a son in Georgia. But she is a frugal sort. “I put money in the bank.”

“To me, it’s a wonderful program,” says Jones, who has lived either in Ashtabula or within 40 miles for her entire life. “Mentally, I would have been very depressed. You need a reason to get up in the morning.”

Ida Edwards had the simplest of reasons to enroll in the program: “My Social Security was running out before the month ran out.”

For the last year, she has worked at the

local Head Start program while she gets on-the-job training as a SCSEP participant. She serves as a monitor aboard a van that takes children to speech therapy. She talks to the children, sings with them, plays with them and helps them find their hats and coats. She is 75 years old, and had been out of the workforce for “10 or 12 years.”

Edwards grew up in South Carolina, married young, had children and lived in New York and Cleveland. She settled in Ashtabula about 45 years ago. She has been a widow for 30 years. She’d be willing to marry again, “but no one has discovered me,” she says, her eyes twinkling.

Edwards is one of about 700 African Americans who live in Ashtabula. The population is more than 95 percent white.

‘I felt a little leery about anybody hiring me at my age. I had no computer experience. I didn’t really know what I could get.’

**Ida Edwards, SCSEP participant**

When she enrolled in SCSEP, “I felt a little leery about anybody hiring me at my age. I had no computer experience. I didn’t really know what I could get.”

She would work fulltime if she could find something appropriate, and she





**Many jobs have left the community and it is difficult to find work, as Ida Edwards (left) can attest.**

continues to look. But for now, “I like being with younger people because it makes me feel young.” When one of the Head Start kids calls her “Grandma”—and many do—she says it puts her “someplace between smiling and crying.”

Ida Edwards could not have made ends meet if she weren’t frugal. She had hoped that her husband would leave her a little something, but he had to go into a nursing home before he died. To qualify for Medicaid coverage, the family had to spend down its assets. “Wouldn’t you know, the very month he died was the month we finished depleting.”

As soon as her husband died, she began to grow fruits and vegetables and to can them. “Tomatoes, string beans, cabbage, peaches, I can them all.” She doesn’t spend money on

luxuries and has no plans to start. “At least I’m not in debt. I got food, I got a roof over my head. I’m OK.”

Olive Jones and Ida Edwards were relatively easy to place because they had excellent attitudes and personal qualities, Fleisher says. Some SCSEP participants are far more challenging.

“We’re as busy now as I think I’ve ever seen us.” But how do you place someone who’s functionally illiterate? Or a deaf and mute person? Or someone who has been shot in the face and suffered disfiguring injuries? Fleisher has managed to help all three.

“We have a lot of poverty, a lot of blight, a lot of areas where you lock the doors.”

The SCSEP program is the candle that lights the way.





Many people have given up, and frustrations frequently erupt around housing projects, like this one on Dayton's west side.

'I'm here to kick them in the tail,' says Pat Barnes, SCSEP coordinator, who refuses to give up.

# Dayton

"These are people who were going to give up," Pat Barnes explains. And well they might have.

They are auto workers whose factories downsized, immigrants with limited English and few transferable skills, lifelong job-jumpers, and convicted felons. Yet these people and many more have found a way up, a way in and a way out via SCSEP—in a city that is far poorer and far older than the average in Ohio. Consider:

- Twenty-three percent of Dayton's 166,179 residents live below the federal poverty level.

- More than 15 percent of Daytonians who are 65 and older live below the poverty line;
- One in every nine Dayton households consists of someone 65 or older who lives alone.
- Nearly 20 percent of the population is over 55.

"Dayton has become a town of a lot of older people," says Pat Barnes, who coordinates the SCSEP program for the Senior Resource Connection, a nonprofit agency with offices

23%

Number of Dayton's 166,179 residents living below the poverty line.

1

in every nine Dayton households consists of someone 65 or older who lives alone.

20%

of the population of Dayton is older than 55.

at the Montgomery County Job Center, the largest One-Stop employment and training center in the country.

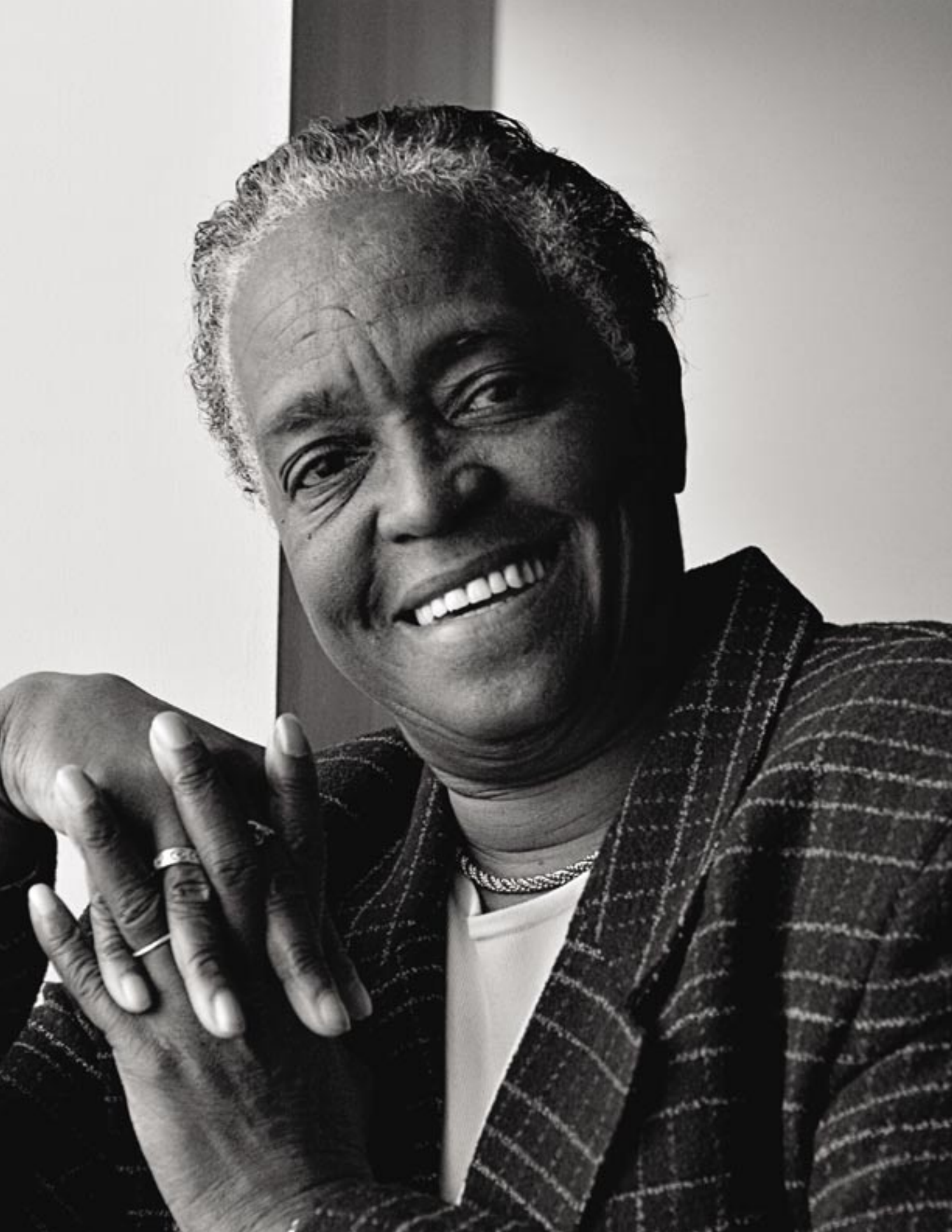
Dayton is a racially divided community, with 55 percent of its population white, 44 percent black. Blacks live in black neighborhoods and whites live in white

neighborhoods, almost without exception. That can lead to isolation and discouragement.

"Older people, they're stuck here," Barnes says. "They feel there's nothing here. They don't have the education to make the opportunities."

Yet SCSEP brings a wide grin to the face of Joan Tanks. In the space of three minutes, she





**Joan Tanks pulls together an outfit for a customer at Clothes That Work.**

uses the word “blessing” six times.

“I am where I am supposed to be right now,” Tanks says, “and this program is the whole reason.” Tanks has graduated from SCSEP and works now as an administrative aide for Clothes That Work, a non-profit organization. She answers the phone, does data processing and makes appointments. SCSEP built the bridge to the job.

Clothes That Work supplies head-to-toe outfits to both men and women so they can look neat and businesslike when they go on job interviews. Tanks earns \$6.50 an hour for 24 hours of work each week. Her only other source of income is Social Security.

Tanks, 64, moved to Dayton five years ago

**So successful in her training that her host agency hired her, Joan Tanks now offers comfort – and clothes – to job-seeking customers.**

‘People come in down and out, you give them some clothes, and they’re a totally different person.’

**Joan Tanks, SCSEP graduate**

to be near her brother, a minister “who needed me.” She has been a widow for 25 years. She left behind 39 years of life in New Orleans, and her three sons, 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. “When I say I moved from New Orleans here, most people say,





**Joan Tanks helps Sonya Harris, 26, find the right look for her job interview.**

‘Are you crazy?’ I say no. The season of New Orleans was over. It was my new time for a new season.”

Tanks has always worked. She was a “fish flinger” aboard a shrimp boat in the Gulf of Mexico. She worked for five years as a receptionist in a senior citizen housing office. But when she came to Dayton, she basically had nothing.

She qualified for—and moved into—subsidized senior-citizen housing. One of her neighbors (she calls them “the ladies”) told her about the SCSEP program. She received job training at Clothes That Work and did so well that the agency hired her, offering her more hours and a higher salary.

For Tanks, work isn’t just about getting a

paycheck. “This is the best,” she says. “People come in down and out, you give them some clothes, and they’re a totally different person.”

Couldn’t she have gotten her job without the help of SCSEP? Why not just hunt through the classified ads in the newspaper? “The newspaper doesn’t care if I quit or not, but Pat (Barnes) cares,” Tanks replies. “It’s a very loving and very caring program. Just the encouragement I’ve received—you can’t get that out of the newspaper.”

Tanks has found that her life experience helps her do her job much better. “I’ve been blessed enough to learn some life lessons,” she says. “I’ve learned to look beyond what I can see. I’ve learned how to recognize a cry

**Signs of the changing times reflect Dayton’s challenges.**





when I don't see a tear. Sometimes I get hugs. Sometimes those are the things that go a long way."

It's especially rewarding when she can pierce the shell that many younger Daytonians have. "I had this young lady, she was used to wearing micro-minis," Tanks says. "She says, 'I can't understand why I can't wear what I want to wear (to a job interview).' So I explained. Some take it nicely. She was one of those."

Tanks completed 12th grade in her native West Virginia. She wanted to go to college "but my parents couldn't afford it." Now, she is "very satisfied with my life"—in part because of her volunteer activities.

Since arriving in Dayton, she has served as a foster grandparent and a prison minister. She could work a 40-hour week for Clothes That Work, but she wants to reserve some time "in case one of the ladies in the building gets sick."

Joan Tanks "wouldn't want to see anything happen to this (SCSEP) program. It's necessary in a way that a lot of things aren't necessary."

Part of the reason is the kind of people whom Pat Barnes helps.

She once placed in a job a woman in her 70s who had just finished serving more than 20 years for murdering the man who raped her daughter. Sound like an impossible-to-place person? It would to many. Not to Barnes. "She did her time. She was trying to get a job, take care of a family and do what everybody else is doing." The woman "got off the bus, passed go and came straight to me." She now works for a local auto parts company.

Another SCSEP enrollee had been an international businessman. He once earned six figures. He returned to Dayton from Dubai because his family lived there. He figured he could find another job without any trouble. Fifteen months later, he had no more savings, no new job—and a bad case of the jitters. "He had never eaten peanut butter or a hot dog—that's how much of an aristocrat he was." The man swallowed his pride, enrolled in SCSEP, took a low-level computer training assignment and eventually found an executive's job in nearby Kentucky. It pays more than \$80,000 a year.

A third Dayton enrollee, 64, was born in

Pakistan and worked all over the world as a religious proselytizer. He retired in Dayton because that was where he was last assigned. He obtained a Green Card and began steps to become an American citizen. But he discovered that without an income or a pension, American life can be very difficult, especially when one has three grown children and an eight-year-old, plus a wife with a severe case of depression. "My eldest daughter tells me, 'Dad, you're in trouble,'" said the man, who asked that his name not be made public. "I tell her, 'You should worry about yourself. I'm not worried about my future.'"

His present is actually quite solid. He qualifies for Medicaid and food stamps. He lives rent-free in his daughter's house. He is able to keep his 1993 Toyota on the road by doing all repairs himself. For daily expenses, he depends on his minimum-wage SCSEP assignment to a local community agency, where he does administrative work. Like so many older adults, this man "knows what

work ethic means," says Nanci McGuire, SCSEP project director for Senior Resource Connection.

Once upon a time, Dayton might not have needed SCSEP. Ford, Chrysler and General Motors plants were thriving—and paying big-enough-to-live-on pensions to their unionized retirees. At one time, a major international cash register company employed thousands. Railroad freight yards employed hundreds more. But the woes of all these industries have made Dayton's economy thinner than it once was, and the need for SCSEP more profound.

The issue with many current Dayton enrollees is confidence. "A lot of them are just afraid, period," says Barnes. "I'm here to kick them in the tail."

The kicks work. "I tell them, 'It's either the job I can find for you or you're at home,'" Barnes says. "You're just going to have to do it." Thanks to SCSEP, they can and they do.

"I thought I was secure for the rest of my life."

#### **Boarded up and abandoned homes and businesses dot Dayton's neighborhoods.**





Ohio's first city, named for Marie Antoinette, has been designated 'economically endangered.'

# Marietta

Gerry Gilliam's divorce settlement had been relatively generous. She had fallen in love with another man and had gone into the real estate business with him in this riverside city of 15,000. Her three children were solidly launched. She owned property. She had \$250,000 in the bank. But in 1981, she discovered that her lover had taken all her money. "I was out on the street." Then, with a wry grin, she adds: "Women are trusting."

Gilliam was 40 years old at the time. She began a 12-year odyssey that took her to a secretarial position in Albany, N.Y., to an assistant-to-the-president job in Florida, and

then, in 1993, back to Marietta. She had lived there as a young wife and mother. Now she was back, to live near a daughter.

For a while, she worked on a newsletter for the county commissioners. "But I couldn't financially make it." At 62, as soon as the law allows, she applied for Social Security and began drawing \$674 a month. That proved to be less than she needed to live. "My God, I said, 'What do I do now?'"

The answer came with a 20-year-old woman Gilliam had helped.

"It was 2:30 in the morning," Gilliam recalls. "I met her at the hospital. She had no



Gerry Gilliam, left, whose training assignment led to a staff job, meets with SCSEP coordinator Mary Lee Humphrey.

shoes, no coat, no nothing." The woman was pregnant, and she had an 18-month-old child with her. Her husband had just beaten her—not for the first time.

Gerry Gilliam arranged temporary shelter through the battered women's program where she works on staff now, thanks to SCSEP.

The woman Gilliam helped had "no visible injuries, but a lot of fear." Gilliam had special sympathy for the woman for a very personal reason. She, too, had been a victim of domestic violence. "It means you can relate better."

"Personally, I can view things differently from people who haven't been there."

Gilliam has worked as a volunteer coordinator at the battered women's shelter for more than two years. She takes home \$384 every two weeks, which pays the real estate

'I'd do it for another  
20 years if they'll  
let me'

**Gerry Gilliam, SCSEP graduate**

taxes, the house insurance, the car insurance. "I have a \$333 house payment, so you can see how far Social Security would go."

The money is only some of the value Gilliam gets from her job. "Giving—that's just a part of me," she says. "I'd do it for another 20 years if they'll let me."

Gilliam needed to push herself into the SCSEP program at first. She had heard about it only accidentally, by word of mouth. She had





Gerry Gilliam at the shelter, and Marietta native Larry Proctor(above) on a downtown sidewalk.

37%

Percentage of Marietta's residents that rent their home, despite a median price of \$73,300.

\$29,272

The amount of Marietta's annual median household income.

always found work, and had long been self-reliant. She didn't think of herself as a ward of the government.

Yet her early choices were creating hurdles as she moved into her 60s. She had married at 19. She never went to college. She had a child at 20, another at 22, a third at 24. Her

husband was on active duty with the U.S. Army, so they moved constantly, which limited her employment options. She first came to Marietta because her husband was assigned there.

Gerry Gilliam admits that she is "a little calloused, maybe," about what life has served





**For many, the prosperity and optimism of earlier days have vanished.**

up to her. But she believes that “if you have enough drive, there’s a hand that will reach out.” In her case, that hand belonged to the Community Action Program Corporation of Washington-Morgan Counties, which operates the SCSEP program in Marietta.

“I don’t think I can stress enough how good (SCSEP participants) feel about giving back to the community,” says David Brightbill, executive director. “They often bring a compassion, a sort of aura. They have a strong work ethic. They always took responsibility. It came with that age. They understand that people count on them.”

When Gerry Gilliam met the battered 20-year-old mother, she told her: “There will be

a place for you. Don’t worry.” Gilliam smiles and adds: “I guess this program has meant the same for me.”

Betty Offenberger had trusted, too.

Her husband was a truck driver for a local meatpacking company. He was a solid provider. Betty supplemented the family income by taking in ironing. They had five children.

“I just thought, ‘Well, we’d be together always,’” Offenberger recalls. “There wouldn’t be anything to worry about.”

But when she was 61, Betty Offenberger’s husband died. She drew his Social Security, but survivor benefits are far smaller than one’s own would be, and Offenberger wasn’t old

**Betty Offenberger’s success in SCSEP has given her a new outlook—and a steady job.**







**Betty Offenberger works as a clerical assistant for the Social Security Administration.**

enough to qualify for her own. Her check was for \$260 a month.

Still, she managed. She did not—and still does not—own a car. She gets around by bus. She does most of her own home repairs. Although all her children and grandchildren live in Marietta, she never asked for help. “I didn’t want to be a burden.”

What she did ask for was a place in the SCSEP program.

Through SCSEP she trained as a cook in a school, and later as a helper at a senior meal center. She left the program after she was hired as a clerical worker at the local Social Security Administration office. She has worked there ever since. She is now 79.

“I refill the copying paper, I pick up all the shredding, I pick up and sort the outgoing mail. Then I sort the incoming

mail,” Offenberger said. She takes home about \$165 after taxes every two weeks in addition to \$605 per month from Social Security.

“They don’t know what they’d do without me,” she says, with a wide, slow smile. “And I don’t know what they’d do without me.” Offenberger is especially glad to be doing community-based work in the city where she was born and raised. “Marietta’s always been friendly.”

Friendly, but ailing. The city has a median annual household income of \$29,272, according to the most recent Census Bureau statistics. The national average is \$41,994. Although the median house price is \$73,300—a bargain in any big city—nearly 37 percent of Marietta’s residents rent their homes.



**Project director Shannah Hensler and David Brightbill face challenges head-on.**

Only 13 of Ohio’s 78 counties lost a larger percentage of their population from 2000 to 2003 than Washington County where Marietta is located. (Marietta itself lost 7 percent.) The federal government has officially designated it as one of 29 economically endangered Appalachian areas. Although the Ohio River provides some commerce—and lots of beauty-- Marietta has lost manufacturing jobs and residents steadily for more than 75 years.

SCSEP keeps the older residents — and local spirit — afloat.

“For so many people, it’s a chance to be with people, a chance to do something worthwhile,” says David Brightbill. “They can see the community valuing what they do.”

‘For so many people, it’s a chance to be with people, a chance to do something worthwhile. ... They can see the community valuing what they do.’

**David Brightbill, executive director**



‘They don’t know what they’d do without me,’  
she says with a wide smile. ‘And I don’t know  
what they’d do without me.’

**Betty Offenberger, SCSEP graduate**

## **New study predicts more seniors will need to work to survive**

The need for SCSEP is expected to rise sharply nationwide as Baby Boomers age. According to the Northeastern University study for Senior Service America, the nation’s population of people 55-plus is expected to

increase by 30 percent in the decade ending in 2012. Those “leading-edge Boomers” include about 9 million individuals who did not finish high school. Nationwide, the number of “poor and near poor” older adults is projected

**Once described by National Geographic as “a picture perfect postcard of a town,” Marietta has lost manufacturing jobs and residents steadily for more than 75 years.**





to increase 41 percent from about 6.2 million in 2004 to 8.7 million in 2015, an increase of more than 2.5 million, according to Andrew Sum, professor of economics and director of Northeastern's Center for Labor Management Studies, who conducted the study.

Many very likely will need assistance entering or re-entering the workforce.

"Funding for job training will be more and more important as seniors continue working past the traditional retirement age," says Merle Grace Kearns, director of the Ohio Department of Aging. Ted Strickland, a Democratic Congressman whose district includes Marietta, says SCSEP gives "older Americans a chance to perform public service, earn an income and live in dignity.

"It is an excellent way to help communities while also helping individual citizens."

Strickland says he "will work to see" that SCSEP "receives the support it needs in the federal budget in order to remain a viable, effective resource for America's seniors."

Adds Kearns: "Reauthorization presents an important opportunity to revitalize the (Older Americans) Act to reflect and respond to the needs of our changing and aging workforce."

The great value of SCSEP may be in terms of spirit, not just in terms of dollars. If the program is ever looking for an appropriate theme song, Marietta might be able to provide it.

At the Lafayette Hotel on Front Street beside the Ohio River, Jimmy Durante repeatedly sings "Young at Heart" over the public address system.

In three Ohio cities, through a dozen interviews, everyone used that expression at least once.

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*Bob Levey is an award-winning former columnist for the Washington Post. He has written extensively on the problems of aging in America. He wrote this report for Senior Service America.*





## By sharing best practices and networks, national sponsors seek to elevate SCSEP's value

Ohio SCSEP administrators say they like having a national organization working with them and for them.

David Brightbill, executive director of the Community Action Program Corporation of Washington-Morgan Counties, likes the cooperative style—one agency in Washington, one in Marietta, he says. The national grantee arrangement “gives us a presence in Washington, D.C. That’s where the money is. They (the national sponsor) are much more able than we are to deal with the Department of Labor.”

But the local partner is important as well. “We live and work in this community.” Somebody “at a desk in Washington, D.C.” can’t know the community “the way we do.”

Jim Seith, national director for the AARP Foundation’s SCSEP program, believes the national organizations bring greater value to the program, and have for 36 years.

SCSEP programs run via national grantees “are on average more successful than (those run by) states,” he says. The AARP Foundation is the second largest of 13 national sponsors that administer SCSEP, behind Experience Works, formerly called Green Thumb. The national sponsors bring standardization of procedures, sophisticated IT support,

centralized data collection and stability at the local level, he says.

Anthony R. Sarmiento, president and executive director of Senior Service America, which administers SCSEP programs in 108 agencies in 23 states and the District of Columbia, has emphasized collaboration, partnerships and network building. “We’ve taken best practices from one part of the country and disseminated them through our network.” For example, Sarmiento has joined the board of SeniorNet, a nonprofit agency focused on helping older adults become computer savvy. Through the partnership Sarmiento hopes to accelerate computer skills-building among SCSEP participants, which should enhance their marketability in the workforce.

Only SCSEP tries to accomplish two complicated goals simultaneously, notes Paul Magnus, executive director of Mature Services, another national grantee that administers SCSEP in Ohio. “Without the job-training emphasis, the program would stagnate and we could not serve new applicants,” he says. “Without the emphasis on community service, the program would lose its identity and purpose.”

— Bob Levey

**Marietta’s David Brightbill works with national partner to meet local needs.**





**Sternwheelers from the glory days accentuate Marietta's river town heritage.**

## Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)

The Senior Community Service Employment Program began as part of the War on Poverty 40 years ago and was so successful that it became a national program under the Older Americans Act in 1973. It is referred to by its acronym — SCSEP (pronounced SEE-sep) — and operates in nearly every county in the nation. To participate in SCSEP, a person must be:

- Age 55 or older;
- Legally eligible to work in the United States;
- Living in a household with income no more than 125 percent of the federal poverty level (or about \$11,000 for an individual, \$16,000 for a couple).

By law, SCSEP gives special attention to veterans as well as seniors most in need — individuals who are at least 60 years old and meet at least one of the following characteristics:

- Income below 100 percent of the federal poverty level;
- Physical or mental disabilities;
- Language barriers;
- Cultural, social, or geographic isolation;
- Poor employment history or prospects.

SCSEP participants are paid minimum wage while they gain marketable job skills working part-time in nonprofit and public organizations, including senior centers, schools, and libraries. The program provides a win-win for participants and their communities: Participants help community organizations extend their reach and capabilities, while developing their own job skills, self-confidence, and a restored sense of self-worth. In 2004, SCSEP participants across the nation contributed 46 million hours of service to their communities, and about 18,000 participants gained regular employment outside the program.

For more information: <http://www.seniorserviceamerica.org>, <http://www.doleta.gov/seniors>







**O**hio is getting older and poorer, and its economy is beset with challenges. Industries are leaving, downsizing, outsourcing. Nearly one in nine older adults live below the poverty level. Some may suddenly need to work, with no idea how to begin. One program offers help and hope – the Senior Community Service Employment Program – not only for the participants, but also for the communities. Inside, the story of SCSEP in three different places: Ashtabula, Dayton and Marietta.