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## **Social and Civic Engagement Among Older Adults In Kent County, 2005**

Community Research Institute-Johnson Center

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# SOCIAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG OLDER ADULTS IN KENT COUNTY

CREATING COMMUNITY FOR A LIFETIME... Planning for an elder-friendly community in Kent County

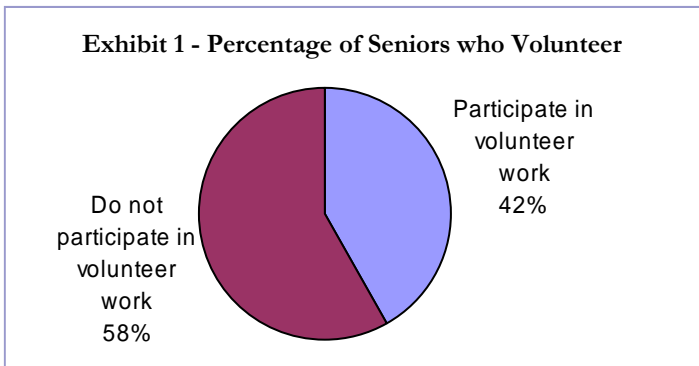
## ELDERS CONTRIBUTE TO THE SOCIAL CAPITAL OF KENT COUNTY

Older adults in Kent County exhibit the underlying quality of social connectedness that political scientist Robert Putnam has described as the “social capital” of the community. This connectedness manifests itself in the fact that the vast majority (93%) of older adults surveyed in Kent County said they had either socialized with friends, attended religious services, or participated in cultural activities at least once in the previous week. We see signs of this social connectedness in the 42% of elders in Kent County who collectively contribute more than 8 million hours of volunteer service each year. And, although only 15% of Kent County elders today work for pay, most research indicates that a higher proportion of baby boomers expect to work well into their “retirement years.” Whether it’s through paid employment, community service, informal relationships or active civic engagement, it’s clear that older adults in Kent County constitute an immeasurable resource with the potential to play a vital role in improving the quality of community life.

*An elder-friendly community provides plentiful and diverse opportunities for older adults to remain fully engaged and make meaningful contributions to their communities.*

## A VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE

Kent County elders are more likely than those in other communities to volunteer. While 42% of older adults in Kent County volunteer, nationally only 36% do so.<sup>1</sup>

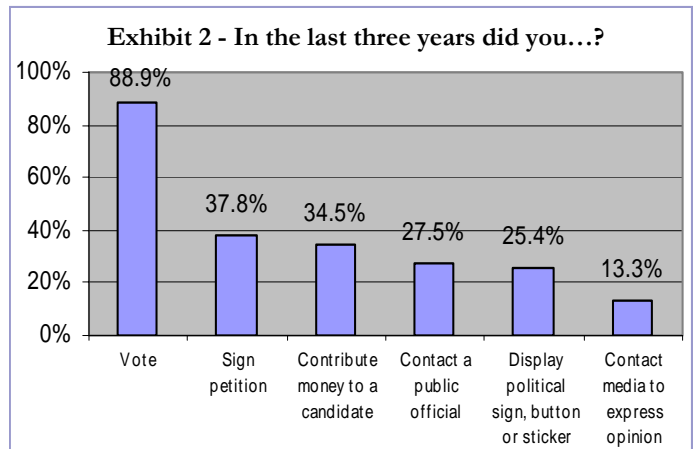


Older volunteers in Kent County devote substantial amount of time each week to their cause. Among those who volunteer:

- 39.6% spend five or more hours per week in volunteer activities.
- 49% contribute less than five hours per week.
- 11.4% weren't sure how many hours a week they volunteer.

## POLITICAL VOICE

Another way for older adults to be active in community is by expressing their opinions. Nearly 9 out of 10 of Kent County's older adults reported voting in the past three years. More than 1 in 3 signed a petition or contacted a public official to express an opinion.

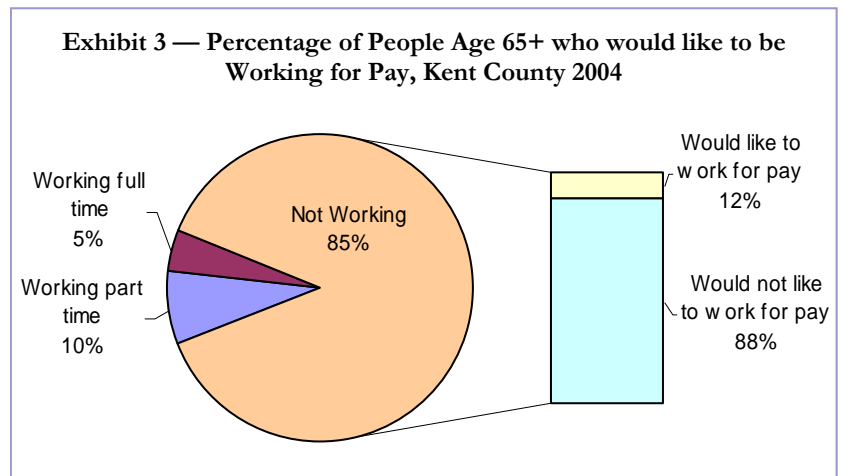


Of those who volunteer in Kent County,

- About a third (32%) donate their time to religious groups.
- About one in ten visit the sick or work in hospitals (12%), provide services for seniors (9%), do favors/chores for family and friends (9%), provide educational assistance (9%), or work with private organizations (9%).
- Other significant volunteer activities include working with kids (8%), providing driver or delivery services (7%), working in civic/social organizations (7%), and in philanthropy, museums or libraries (8%).

## FEW ELDERS WORK FOR PAY – AND MOST LIKE IT THAT WAY!

Overall, only a small proportion of older adults in Kent County work full time (5%) or part time (10%) – about the same as national figures. The vast majority (85%) do not work for pay and are not interested in working for pay. Only 12% of the non-working elders in Kent County would like to work for pay – fewer than found in other communities surveyed (14% - 33%) and nationally (24%).



## DESPITE INVOLVEMENT, ISOLATION STILL A PROBLEM FOR SOME

A number of responses indicate that social isolation can be a significant problem for older adults in Kent County.

- Over 18% would like to be more socially active.
- A quarter did not socialize with friends or neighbors in the past week.
- More than one in five say they have no close friends in neighborhood.
- Nearly half don't get out of the house every day.

## IT'S OUR FUTURE!

Today, one in ten Kent County residents – 62,102 people – is 65 or over. Most experts agree that, within the next 30 years, that number will double to nearly 125,000. Creating Community for a Lifetime is planning today so that the older adults of tomorrow can be fully engaged, offering their skills, experience and wisdom to help address the challenges in their neighborhoods, communities and around the world.

**Creating Community for a Lifetime** is a Kent County initiative seeking to build a framework for long-term planning to address the challenges and opportunities presented by an aging community. Lead partners are the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.

Information in this Data Sheet is derived from a 2004 AdvantAge Initiative (AI) survey of Kent County residents 65 or older. This survey provides an opportunity to compare local findings with results from AI Surveys conducted in other communities as well as nationally. Analysis of Kent County survey results was provided by the Community Research Institute at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, Grand Valley State University.

For more information about *Creating Community for a Lifetime* or a summary of the full AI survey results for Kent County, see [www.community4alifetime.org](http://www.community4alifetime.org).

For more information about the *AdvantAge Initiative*, see [www.vnsny.org/advantage](http://www.vnsny.org/advantage).

<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Penny H., Mia R. Oberlink, Elizabeth Simantov, and Michael G. Gursen (April 2004). A tale of two older Americas: Community opportunities and challenges. Report on the 2003 national survey of adults aged 65 and older. New York: Center for Home Care Policy & Research, Visiting Nurse Service of New York, page 8. Retrieved March 2, 2005 from [www.vnsny.org/advantage/survey.html#survey](http://www.vnsny.org/advantage/survey.html#survey).