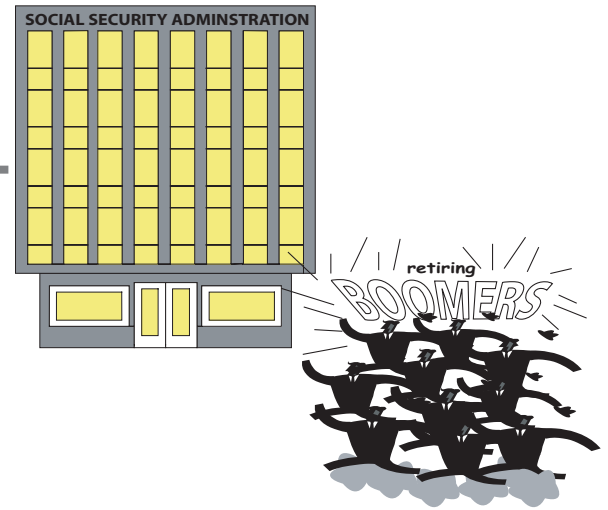


The Long Gray Line: Older Workers And The Correctional Work Force



By Joyce Fogg, Charles J. Kehoe and Timothy O. Kestner

The population bubble commonly recognized as the baby boomer generation has been moving through time and is now beginning to produce retirees on a daily basis. Most researchers and statisticians roughly define boomers as people born between 1946 and 1964. Given this as the standard, by 1964 the first of this group was entering the work force. The oldest of these citizens turned 60 last year, and the rate of retirement will only increase in the coming years as Social Security benefits become an option. The retirement of this segment of the work force equates to what some have termed the “brain drain.”

The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2030 the number of people 65 and older will nearly double. This age group that represented 13 percent of the population in 2000 will account for 20 percent in 2030 and continue to grow at that rate for several decades as the bubble of baby boomers continues to move through time.¹

It is common knowledge that personal earnings and life expectancies have increased in the past century, and this trend is most visible with the boomers. With this trend, workers are more likely than generations before to exchange labor for leisure at an earlier time in life.² As people stop contributing to Social Security due to early retirement, and with additional years drawing benefits due to longevity, the Social Security program will continue to strain under these conditions. This will undoubtedly be exacerbated by the decline in the growth of the labor force. By one estimate, in 2000 there were approximately five people between the ages of 20 and 64 for every person 65 and older. By 2030, that figure will have declined to three people.³

As indicated in Figure 1, workers ages 18 to 44 (which includes a portion of boomers as defined above) represent a pool of talent desired by employers. The issue here is multidimensional. First, there is a large group of workers that is poised to leave the work force, whose size is unprecedented in time. Second, the number of workers moving through time is less than the number leaving. And last, many domestic companies, and different countries for that matter, are competing for a declining group of workers. This competition exacerbates the problems associated with a declining work force. Although high-tech and computer-

based industries currently are the nucleus of intense recruitment, industries that tend to be lower on the academic and training pyramid are facing greater pressures directly related to this concentration in recruitment.

What the Statistics Show

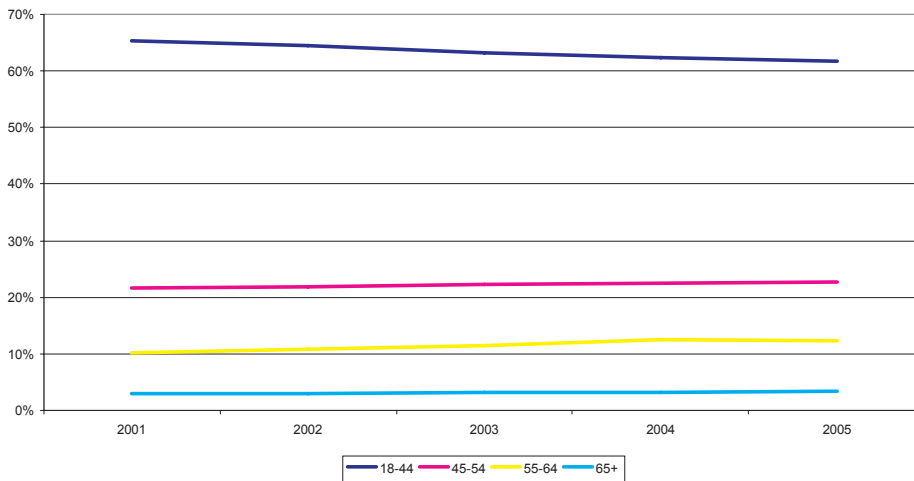
Virginia is typical of many states facing a changing work force. In 2005, the most recent year of complete data, baby boomers represented approximately 35 percent of Virginia's 3.5 million workers and grew by more than 152,000 (14 percent) from 2001 to 2005. In real terms, by 2026 approximately 1.2 million workers most likely will be out of the work force.⁴ As Figure 1 demonstrates, workers ages 18 to 44 are in decline while the workers representing the baby boomers and those just behind — the Silent Generation — are increasing as a proportion of Virginia workers.

Workers in the 18 to 44 age group decreased from 65 percent of employment to 62 percent during the five-year period. This may not seem very threatening; nonetheless, the size of this group decreased by about 36,000, representing a fall of 1.7 percent within the age group. The polar effect is seen with workers 45 to 64 years old whose group rose by 4 percent of total employment from 2001 to 2005 (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the 18 to 44 age group is where the decline is occurring. The decline in workers ages 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 is especially disconcerting, as these are the workers that immediately follow the age groups heading for retirement. Positively, the group representing workers under 18 to age 24 is increasing during the period and is growing as a percent of total employment. However, these workers total less than either the 25 to 34 or 35 to 44 age groups.

Data from the Virginia Employment Commission reveal the gender composition of the work force that is moving toward retirement. In the 55 to 64 age group, there were fewer females in total and percentage terms from 2001 to 2005; yet, the percentage of females as a portion of total employment grew faster than males. Similar statistics follow workers 65 and older as far as percentage per year; however, the growth during the period is only slightly more for females.

**Figure 1. Virginia Work Force by Age Group: 2001-2005
(Percent of Employment)**



potential gaps in the work force and to develop strategies to address those gaps. The state of Georgia, in its fourth year of work force planning, offers several tools on its Web site⁷ that provide agencies with “flexible applications that help to prepare for work force planning as well as simplify and streamline the work force planning process.”

With a strategic work force plan, a juvenile or adult detention center, correctional agency or community corrections program can determine if the agency’s human resources plans are aligned with the agency’s overall goals and objectives. Most states, counties and larger cities are now monitoring the number of employees who are eligible for retirement and adjusting their benefit and retirement plans accordingly. In 1997, Michigan changed its retirement system from a defined benefit system to a defined contribution pension system. The reason for the change in the system was largely fiscally driven.

The New York City Department of Corrections knows that 44 percent of its uniformed employees will become eligible for retirement in the next four years. Past experience has shown that of these, approximately 60 percent to 75 percent of the eligible employees will retire at their earliest eligibility. That adds up to about 6,000 employees. The department is responding by actively recruiting new candidates and increasing succession planning and career development efforts.

Strategies for Building the Bench

One of correctional leaders’ greatest concerns is the transfer of institutional knowledge to the next generation of top administrators and managers. When a large number of senior management with special skills and a deep understanding of the agency’s history retire, the brain drain can have a significant impact on agency operations for months and sometimes years.

Many correctional agencies see training as one of the best approaches to ensure knowledge transfer. The Alabama Department of Youth Services, for example, knows that 29 percent of the 580 full-time, classified employees were eligible to retire as of July 1, 2006, including 60 percent of its facility

administrators. The department now has concentrated its knowledge transfer on higher-level administrators. Along with the Virginia Department of Corrections, it has contracted with the American Correctional Association to provide leadership training for the future leaders of the agency.

Succession planning is seen as one of the key strategies that correctional agencies must consider when anticipating future retirements, and it goes hand in hand with training future leaders. According to NIC: “Retaining talented employees is one thing; preparing them for positions of greater responsibility is another.

This means planning for succession, grooming employees for upward mobility, and ‘packaging’ promotional opportunities in a manner designed to appeal to the current work force.”⁸ Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) estimates that more than 3,000 employees in primary security positions (correctional officers through wardens) will be eligible to retire between 2006 and 2011. According to Don Murray, managing director of quality assurance, the corporation has implemented a process that includes carefully reviewing its talent at all levels. Wardens who have potential to move to the next level of management are identified for further development, as well as assistant wardens and chiefs who can become future wardens. All CCA employees are reviewed for potential leadership roles. New supervisory training and the CCA University are being developed to address these issues.

Other strategies include mentoring programs, cross-training, double-filling positions with the soon-to-be-retired employee and his or her successor, and hiring back retired employees for a period of time to mentor and train the new leadership. The Florida Deferred Retirement Optional Program aids the retiree by improving the retirement benefit while continuing to provide the state with a highly experienced and talented employee for five additional years. Jane McElroy, administrative services director with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, says the program puts the state agency on notice that an employee with 30 or more years of service intends to retire sometime in the next five years, so the agency can identify a successor who can then be trained by the outgoing employee. Florida also has changed its retirement system to attract younger workers and retirees from other fields.

On the horizon, some correctional leaders believe that greater portability of retirement plans, similar to those provided to top management at colleges and universities, will make corrections a more attractive career to the “generation Xers” and “millennials.” Phased retirement plans that permit employees to draw retirement benefits in addition to wages also are being implemented in some jurisdictions, but compensation reform may be needed to make it a universal approach.

Identifying approaches to keep experienced and veteran employees on the job longer is, in many cases, an advantage to correctional agencies and to the employee who wishes to keep working, but for fewer hours. For juvenile and adult correctional agencies, having a work force plan that reflects trends and innovative approaches is critical to addressing future work force challenges.

The Graying Work Force as a Resource

If projections come true, more workers will reach retirement age with fewer younger workers to take their place. One option will be to see older workers as a resource. Many in this age group want to continue to work, but would like less stress, flexible hours, the feeling of making a difference and enjoyment from performing the work. Boredom, nothing to look forward to and no feeling of self-worth drive many boomers back into the workplace.

For various reasons, many retired boomers and seniors are looking for part-time work. Because many seniors have years of training, they are seen as a real bargain for employers. In addition, it is cost effective to hire older workers because their work ethic has been proved over time and their varied experiences are an asset to an organization. Although many people may retire at 55 or 60 from their careers, 10 to 15 years of productive work may still be ahead, and they may want to remain active.

Younger employees not only will change jobs frequently, but estimates indicate that they will change careers four to five times before they are 55 years old. Employers spend millions of hours each year recruiting, prescreening, interviewing, hiring and training workers only to find that they are not suited for the job or are not happy staying in the job more than a few months. Where can they find a dedicated, steady work force that will cost them less to hire, train and maintain? It is well worth the effort to recruit and hire boomers. The savings realized by the employer by not paying for training and, in some cases, health insurance is significant.

Marketing Corrections To Attract Older Workers

Marketing and advertising positions to older workers is different than marketing to generation Xers and millennials. Consider the following questions:

- What benefit options are offered for older workers? What is needed at this stage of their life is very different than what younger workers require. If older workers are on Medicare, an employer may have to make up what is not covered or provide prescription drug coverage.
- Is flexible scheduling provided? Some older workers have commitments and want different hours. Some can handle early morning work that no one else wants.
- Have managers been trained to lead and coach older workers? Communication and feedback is different with a 60-year-old than with a 26-year-old.

- Is there a reward system that is specific to the needs and values of older workers? Older workers respond to different types of monetary and nonmonetary rewards than younger employees do.

In the war for talent, hiring older workers makes good business sense and will pay dividends for several years to come. Correctional agencies should seriously examine where older workers will strengthen the organization and help it to achieve its goals and objectives.

The changing demographics of the work force require that correctional agencies develop strategies to prepare for increases in retirements and to consider the baby boomer generation as a possible resource when filling vacancies brought on by retirements and normal turnover. Having a strong work force plan in place, which is updated annually, can prevent operational problems brought on by retirements, turnover and extended vacancies.

ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Congressional Budget Office. 2003. *Baby boomers' retirement prospects: An overview*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Congressional Budget Office.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2004. *National population projections — Annual projections of the resident population by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: Lowest, middle, highest series and zero international migration series, 1999 to 2001*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.

² U.S. Congressional Budget Office. 2003.

³ U.S. Congressional Budget Office. 2003.

⁴ For purposes of this article, work force refers to those who are employed (i.e., the working work force).

⁵ Virginia Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission. 2006. *Impact of an aging state workforce*. Report of the Virginia Joint Legislative and Review Commission to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia. Richmond, Va.

⁶ National Institute of Corrections. 2005. *Developing tomorrow's leaders and managers*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

⁷ www.gms.state.ga.us/agencyservices/wfplanning/rapidwf.asp

⁸ National Institute of Corrections. 2005.

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