

## **AARP Chapters: Good for Seniors; Good for the Community<sup>1</sup>**

AARP chapters are organizations devoted to service to the community in which they reside. They are chartered by AARP and embraced by their respective state offices. They operate according to bylaws, some of which are prescribed by AARP. They are composed of seniors, citizens 50+ years of age, and adhere to the motto of the founder of AARP, Ethel Percy Andrus: "To serve, not to be served."

There are more than 800 AARP chapters chartered in the United States and Puerto Rico, and Virgin Islands. Almost 40 of these exist in Virginia. They range in size from a very few to hundreds of members depending on their location and the culture of those communities.

Chapter viability depends on leadership of the organization and its compatibility with the prevailing cultures of the community. Inevitably, organizational health depends on its relationships with other entities in the community.

The principal goal of AARP chapters is enhancing the quality of life as we age. Successful aging, then, is the dominant operational guideline for local chapters. Whatever contributes to enjoyment, health, well-being, and enlightenment of members represents a viable activity for chapters.

### ***Essential Components of Successful AARP Chapters***

***Leadership is the key to successful chapters!*** Leaders make things happen and may override other key factors in organization success; however, successful chapters are likely to be characterized by certain commonalities:

- Significant relationships with other community organizations
- Renewing membership
- Responsive system of governance
- Regular, meaningful programs to enlighten members and spark interest
- Consequential projects and activities that allow member involvement and reward
- Frequent communication with members containing crucial information for successful aging

#### ***Significant relationships with other community organizations***

AARP chapters exist in a community composed of multiple entities ranging from governments, churches, families, non-profit organizations, civic organizations, and personal interest groups.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is intended as a catalyst for discussion. There is no single set of practices that defines a successful chapter but those listed in this document generally are found to some extent in all chapters that are doing well. Discussants may find elements contained in this document that might help any specified chapter when tailored to the culture of the group.

Taken as a whole, enormous energy is expended through these groups that tends to attract persons of similar interests and who want to be a part of something vital to an expressive community. Successful AARP chapters must fit in the fabric of these cultures and must contribute substantive value that enriches the environments for all.

### *Responsive system of governance*

Governance is a system by which an organization operates. Essential elements of governance include a policy making body, often called a board of directors, officers authorized to carry out organization policies, and committees normally expected to conduct the business of the organization. Responsive governance is a system sensitive to its external and internal cultures and reacts to them positively in an ethical and legal manner.

### *Renewing membership*

Membership of an organization must be renewable to survive in the long term. New members not only bring diversity of ideas that invigorate current operations but provide sustainability of the chapter itself. Natural attrition of members must be countered with replacement.

### *Regular, meaningful programs to enlighten members and spark interest*

A principal obligation of an organization is to nurture its members by responding to their needs. One of the most pervasive needs of seniors is enlightenment; that is, constant learning about their environments and feeding their thirst for understanding their world. Organizations can and should provide ongoing educational opportunities open to all members that enriches lives through experience and knowledge.

### *Consequential projects and activities that allow member involvement and reward*

To feel connected to an organization; that is, to feel rewarded for being part of the group, members must experience its essence by physical, mental, and emotional involvement in communal activities. This involvement can be manifest by simple awareness through reading or talking with others on the one hand to leadership roles that shape the character of the organization on the other. Examples of meaningful involvement include reading newsletters, attending social events, participating in meetings, joining discussion groups, listening to speakers at program events, membership in the policy making groups, holding officer positions, and planning events are examples of meaningful involvement.

### *Frequent communication with members containing crucial information for successful aging*

Constituent meetings, newsletters, blogs, websites, and email messages are mechanisms available to all organizations to enable regular messaging to members. Employing each of these devices offers another meaningful form of involvement of members who must write or design these tools. To be effective, these messaging tools must be used reliably and frequently.

## **Summary**

AARP chapters composed of these essential elements can succeed in communities of energetic persons who want to be involved in something larger than themselves. Inquisitive minds invariably seek new understanding of the world in which they live. AARP chapters can play a vital role in this quest.