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Reinvent retirement to include meaningful work, expert advises

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MIAMI -- America faces a "once-a-century" transformation, one that will erase the modern concept of retirement and reinvent what it means to get older, one of the nation's leading experts on aging said Tuesday.

The idea of retirement is outdated and out of step with the economic, social and medical changes that have occurred over the past 60 years, said author and nonprofit foundation leader Marc Freedman. The country needs to adapt by encouraging people to work longer in jobs they enjoy that have meaning and benefit society, he added.

"The nature of later life is changing," said Freedman, featured speaker at the Florida Conference on Aging. "We are inventing a new stage in life. We don't yet understand how new and profound a creation this is."

Freedman and others, including university researchers, think tanks and organizations such as AARP, are trying to raise the national consciousness about the unprecedented combination of factors that are reshaping the fabric of America. Increases in life expectancy, improved health and the sheer number of older people are moving the country into uncharted territory.

Society's response to changing aging trends affects, among other things, the the national budget, which pays for Social Security pensions and health care for older people. But Freedman argued that the impacts are more far-reaching, extending into everyday life in communities, business innovation and groups that rely on volunteers.

The current retirement model, which emerged after the Great Depression and World War II, evolved when people died younger and the economic goal was to push older workers from an amply supplied work force. Real estate marketers and employers touted the concept of retirement as leisure-filled "golden years," however brief they might be.

"It's one of the most remarkable social transformations in American history," said Freedman, whose book "Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life," was published in June. "It was a beautiful vision for a different time."

The average person can expect to live more than a decade past the traditional retirement age of 65 -- and many live far beyond. Instead of needing people to leave the labor force, many occupations will soon face a shortage of workers, Freedman said. The key, he said, will be to help people remain active and engaged in the work force in ways that fulfill their desire to find meaning, identity and a



COURTESY PHOTO

Marc Freedman is founder and CEO of Civic Ventures, a nonprofit national service program for people 50 and over. He says the nation's current concept of retirement is out-of-date.

DAILY REPORT

Victor Hull, reporter on aging issues, will be filing from the 2007 Florida Conference on Aging in Miami through Thursday, in the Herald-Tribune and in his blog at heraldtribune.com.

connection with other people late in life.

Most people have a vague sense of what they want, but there is no good way to connect the talents of those who may want to change jobs, or have more flexible schedules later in life, with employers' needs.

"There is no vision for what work could be," said Freedman, who heads a nonprofit national service program for people 50 and over, called Civic Ventures.

"There is supply and demand, but they're not getting together.

"If we can be creative, so people can have work they really look forward to, we could be on the verge of a social and economic renewal."

Freedman called for a national effort comparable to the post-World War II education and housing programs, and the 1960s establishment of Medicare, Medicaid and the Older Americans Act.
