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Editorial: New ways to view work and retirement

Making the most of the new wave of older Americans.

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One 52-year-old real-estate insurance agent switched careers after 20 years and went to work on affordable housing. A 50-something truant officer took up emergency-care nursing as a second career. And a retirement-age corporate executive left to work in the trenches to help the homeless.

Those are examples of midlifers who weren't ready for a rocking-chair or golf-course retirement. As the huge wave of baby boomers ages, their types should become the rule rather than the exception, both for the benefit of the seniors and for society overall. Older Americans are clamoring to stay active in more meaningful ways -- and the work force needs their talent, expertise and commitment.

Marc Freedman, a national scholar on aging, beautifully makes the case for matching older people with opportunities for meaningful work. He was in the Twin Cities recently to discuss "Encore: Finding Work that Matters in the Second Half of Life," his new book that profiles people who made major job changes and found more fulfilling, productive lives.

Freedman persuasively argues that later years can offer freedom *to* work in more flexible, meaningful ways, rather than only a time to be free *from* work. That approach can help fill predicted worker shortages in a range of areas and give opportunities for more seniors to "give back" in education, social services, health care and other helping professions. Moreover, taking those careers frequently fits with boomers' goals; surveys show that many want to work either as volunteers or paid workers in such fields.

Truth is, Americans are living and working longer than ever. Some work because they feel they must, given the high cost of everything from health care to housing. But their work need not be drudgery if people consider ways to best match their skills, interests and passions with what needs doing in society.

This looming population shift is also rightly on the minds of Minnesota officials, who are pondering the challenges and opportunities ahead. Local demographers predict that by 2030 the number of Minnesotans over age 65 will double, rising to 1.3 million and representing over 20 percent of the state's population. In fact, during the next half century, most of the state's population growth will occur among people over 50.

To prepare for the change, the state departments of human services and health are working on strategies to realign policies and services as the state ages. One of five major action themes is the crucial need to redefine work and retirement for older citizens.

Because of their numbers, boomers will make up the largest senior citizen segment of the population in history. Efforts like Freedman's and the state's can help both the individuals and society get the most benefit from the maturing of America.

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