

Civic Health Index calls for state to leverage generational differences

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An apparent disinterest in interacting with neighbors, voting or charitable giving aren't exactly positive traits of a future civic leader, but it's true for Michigan's next crop.

The recently released 2015 Michigan Civic Health Index highlighted the vastly different civic profiles of millennials and the "silent" generation, outlining how those differences can be addressed to promote a greater civic health in the state.

This was just one of the many trends touched on by the report, which was released earlier in the month by the Michigan Nonprofit Association in conjunction with the National Conference on Citizenship.

The report is designed to measure the state's engagement in civic activities and to address glaring disparities via recommended courses of action.

Generational differences were one focus of the report, which found that millennials (those born after 1981) were the generation least likely to engage in civic activities such as donating money to charity, attending public meetings and voting. On the other side of the spectrum, the "silent" generation (born between 1931-1945) proved to be polar opposites with most members fully engaged in civic activity.

The report recommended educators and employers connect the millennial generation, whether that be via high school and college service learning courses or employers of millennial employees helping to facilitate civic engagement.

"This is really the first time that we've had four generations (Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation) involved and volunteering in a big way," said Rob Collier, president and CEO of the Council of Michigan Foundations. "The culture of millennials requires nonprofits to adjust their business models and to think about a different strategy to engage millennials and getting them to realize that they're having an impact.

"The word 'impact' is not going away, especially in the nonprofit sector. It's now part of the ongoing method we all operate under and part of it is driven by millennials."

When it comes to making social connections in the community, the millennial population, which includes 2.4 million people in Michigan, was not particularly engaged. Of all four generations, millennials were least likely to trust, talk to, do favors or work for neighbors.

The index showed that 26 percent of millennials volunteer, compared to 35 percent of Gen Xers. Also, 31 percent of millennials reported having given \$25 or more in charitable giving, which was easily last among the four generations. The "silent" generation and baby boomers led charitable giving with 64 percent and 62 percent, respectively.

The index also recommended that nonprofits and community leaders leverage the experience of the “silent” generation, which leads in civic participation, by “developing intergenerational civic projects that will enable this senior generation to mentor members of those generations following it.”

“For an older Michigan — it’s great that we have an influx of millennials — we have to tap our older generation, too,” Collier said.

While the index might paint the millennial generation in an unflattering light, there could be significant contributions by the demographic that aren’t showing up on the report, according to Kyle Caldwell, executive director of Grand Valley State University’s Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy.

“It’s important to note that millennials are a diverse group ... so they are not a monolith,” Caldwell said in an e-mail. “New generations’ habits of giving and engagement are hard to study and discern because while most studies look at ‘activity,’ they don’t measure intensity. (While) many of the new generation may not give financially to traditional institutions or volunteer in traditional ways, they are often very much willing to roll up their sleeves and engage directly in causes, but not through formal institutions.

“They also willingly and knowingly conflate their work (vocation) and charity (philanthropy) and look for opportunities to do good while doing well. They also see their consumerism (buying products that have a social good) as a means of philanthropy.”

BUILDING CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

The index stated that a connected feeling throughout a community or neighborhood is a driving factor that leads individuals to take care of one another. The report revealed that 61 percent of people in Michigan trusted their neighbors (28th in the nation), but that wasn’t reflected in the fact that only 35 percent talk to their neighbors and 11 percent do favors for them — some of the worst marks in the nation.

A proposed solution would be to develop neighborhood outreach programs that leverage existing resources, emphasize good design and walkability and nurture community connectedness.

“One (issue that nonprofits are focusing on) is the whole issue of access and making sure that the whole community has access to operations and services,” Collier said. “You see that happening in the full spectrum of nonprofits. Access is clearly one issue that is strategic about walkability and placemaking.”

Caldwell of the Johnson Center agreed.

“There is a trend toward moving from the suburbs to the cities both among older and younger generations,” Caldwell said. “Those communities interested in growth have to think about interconnected, accessible and engaging communities as the center of any economic growth strategy. Again, younger generations are not looking to long-term relationships with large institutions for their career journey — they will likely be more individualistic and entrepreneurial in their efforts to support their lifestyle and build their wealth.

“Older generations are more active in retirement than the previous generations and boomers in particular are living longer and with more active and engaged lifestyles that communities will need to reflect.”

MICHIGAN’S GIVING/VOLUNTEERING HABITS

All generations considered, the state earned higher marks for charitable efforts and volunteering. Michigan ranked 19th in the nation in volunteering with 28 percent, up from 32nd in the 2012 index.

In charitable giving (\$25 or more), Michigan was 34th with 50 percent.

“While the overall population is declining, we are seeing more young people moving to cities and their expectations for community engagement, service, volunteering and general philanthropy is high,” Caldwell said about the jump in volunteering. “It should be noted that Michigan has traditionally had a very healthy giving and volunteering rate and while not top in the nation, Michigan has been ranked above normal by all indexes looking into volunteering. This is likely due to the extensive ‘infrastructure’ — local volunteer connecting organizations and community foundations — in our state.”

- See more at: <http://mibiz.com/news/nonprofit-business/item/23091-civic-health-index-calls-for-state-to-leverage-generational-differences#sthash.DEVW4Mf5.dpuf>