

Retirement, *what's that?* Older Alaskans are spending their golden years working

By Gina Romero

Mildred Healy retired from the State of Alaska as a corrections officer when she was 60. She planned to spend her golden years quilting and traveling, but said she became restless. At 62, Healy is back at work.

Healy joined AmeriCorps and works at the Anchorage Job Center in Muldoon assisting older Alaskans who are looking for jobs. The AmeriCorps contract began in October and ends in March. Healy said it is the perfect situation because she can travel during the summer and keep busy during the winter.



“I love being out,” she said. “I like people and I like the idea I can help people.”

Healy is a part of a growing number of Alaskans who, instead of retiring, have decided to go back to work. Many, like Healy, return to work for a social outlet and to stay in a routine. However, a growing number of older people are either coming back or remaining in the work force for economic reasons. Baby boomers, the huge generation of Americans born in the 20 years after World War II roughly from 1946 to 1964, are a prime example.

“They are broke, they don’t have the money, they don’t have the financial resources, especially now not just because of what we are going through financially, but just in general. Boomers have never been big savers, so they don’t necessarily have the retirement base they need to walk away from something,” said Robert Wendover, director of The Center for Generational Studies.

State economist Neal Fried said there is no doubt older Alaskans, including those outside of the baby boomer generation, are impacting Alaska’s employee pool and are one of the fastest growing age groups in the state. Employees who are 50 and older now make up 25 percent of Alaska’s work force. That is up 6 percent from 2002 when older Alaskans made up 19 percent of the state’s workers, according to the State Department of Labor.

Carol Northamer is Director of Mature Alaskans Seeking Skills Training, or MASST. The federally funded program, operated by Nine Star Education & Employment Services, helps low to moderate income Alaskans, who are 55 and older, find jobs. Eligible candidates get paid for on-the-job training and assistance finding a permanent job. Although the oldest program participant is 93, most fall between the ages of 55 and 65. Candidates are able to take computer training courses, practice job interview skills and receive assistance writing resumes.

Teresa Prokopeuff entered the MASST program in August. She worked as a health aide for 24 years in the community of Atka, located on the Aleutian Islands. Prokopeuff retired in 2005 and wanted to stay in Atka, but found the cost of living in rural Alaska was too high. She moved to Anchorage in June for a job and quickly realized a need to learn new skills before entering the work force.

“Any kid of job is computer oriented and you have to know some kind of technology these days,” she said.

Joe Littlewolf is in the same boat. He entered the MASST program in July 2008 in hopes of finding a job to help make ends meet. He worked in various management positions before he became medically disabled in 2000.

“It is very expensive to live here in Alaska, in Anchorage the rents are high, gas is high and everything costs a lot more money than it used to. I have been up here since 2003 and I think the cost of living has gone up substantially,” he said.

Prokopeuff and Littlewolf are in good company. The number of older people in the work force is a growing national trend. Between 1977 and 2007, employment of people 65 and older more than doubled and by 2017, workers in the same age category are expected to account for 6 percent of the total labor force. That number is up sharply from 2006 when people 65 and older made up 3 percent of the labor force, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The blend of older and younger generations is creating challenges for employers in the work force throughout the nation. Situations such as younger professionals getting frustrated with older employees who don't embrace technology or who are stuck in their ways is a common obstacle, according to the Center for Generational Studies.

Generational expert Robert Wendover gave another example of an older employee complaining several times to a manager about inappropriate behavior among younger coworkers. Wendover advises employers throughout the U.S., including the Municipality of Anchorage and Providence Alaska Medical Center. He said many mid-level managers, who tend to be in their 30s or 40s, have their hands full trying to meet the needs of employees who range from ages 17 to 70.

“They have a considerable number of individuals who are 20 years older than they are they are supervising. And, of course they have younger people that are coming in,” he said. “A lot of it is balance.”

Despite the challenges, Carol Northamer with MASST said Alaska employers value older employees and the program successfully places candidates in a variety of permanent jobs. In fact, Northamer said many employers call her specifically wanting to hire a more mature worker.

“I think a lot of employers are recognizing the fact that when they hire someone that is 55 or older, that they're getting a really good employee, and often one that is more focused and dedicated to the job than maybe a younger worker,” she said.

Curtis Strand is the latest success story for MASST. He owned a ranch in North Dakota and raised cows for 40 years. Strand retired from ranching when he was 59, and moved to Alaska last June to be with his daughter and granddaughter. He entered MASST three months ago and just accepted a position at HR Block. Strand said he plans to work until he is 100 or so.

“As long as I'm still having fun,” he said. “There is no use in working if you aren't having fun.”

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