

USDA's Forest Service employs senior workers

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Thousands of older Americans know for sure there is no time limit on talent, and they're proving it in a government program designed to put their experience and skills to use.

Called the Senior Community Service Employment Program, it provides employment, training and community service for low income Americans who are 55 and older. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service is the only federal sponsor of this program, which was created under Title V of the Older Americans Act.

"The first thing employers look for on the application of a prospective employee is experience," said Leon Anderson, director of the Forest Service's human resource programs. "There's certainly no shortage of experience among the people in this program."

Because May is Older Americans Month, Anderson said, it is an ideal time for employers to consider the potential benefits of hiring older workers.

"In addition to having experience and a willingness to

work," Anderson said, "participants in the program have proven that older workers are conscientious and punctual. They also bring a mature attitude and stability to work situations."

Anderson said the program has three objectives. First, the program provides employment and supplemental income for older persons. Secondly, it provides opportunities for performing community service. Thirdly, participation often results in permanent jobs for enrollees in private industry.

"We are particularly interested in placing enrollees in permanent positions outside the Forest Service," Anderson said. "Each outplacement means another person can enter the program."

Some of the best examples of the success of the program are provided by enrollees, Anderson said.

Thirty-six years ago, Ann Robinson was working as a chemical analyst. She stopped working to raise her children. After her children were grown, her economic problems began.

"My husband works as a building contractor, but due to a lack of construction activity, we began to feel the economic pinch," said Robinson. "It was a God-send to be able to join the Senior Community Service Employment Program."

Robinson now works on the Uinta National Forest in Utah, where she maintains National Forest signs. She also has compiled a booklet about the Uinta.

"Now that the economy is starting to recover, my husband's business has picked up," Robinson said. "I'll be leaving the program soon because I'll no longer be economically eligible to participate. That's good news, but I'll miss the work I've been doing here."

The Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina has a husband and wife team working in the program. Kathleen Samuelson, 56, was working as a substitute school teacher before joining the program. She serves as a receptionist at a Forest Service office while her husband, Robert, serves in the fire tower at the Sliding Rock

Recreation Area and does general maintenance work.

"Frankly, I don't know how many of the older people in this area would survive without the program," said Mrs. Samuelson. "There just isn't any other work available."

The Samuelsons say the program provides more than economic rewards.

"I feel good about the work I do here," said Mrs. Samuelson. "At the end of the day, Robert and I feel we have made an important contribution toward serving the public."

On the Caribou National Forest in Idaho, 72-year-old Charles Stucki works in a warehouse and repairs equipment. In addition to providing physical exercise to maintain his health, Stucki says the program helps his psychological well-being.

"Frankly, I think the program keeps me from going crazy," Stucki said. "After working for many years as a school teacher, I was looking forward to retirement. But when I finally retired, I quickly found that I missed having a meaningful job."

Stucki has served in the program three years, and he believes those years have been some of the most productive in his life.

Enrollees also work in urban centers. For instance, Arlene Alexander, 59, compiles budgetary data at the Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"Of course the money I earn is important, but I also get a great sense of satisfaction from my work," she said. "I feel good about being a productive member of society."

There are 3,601 enrollees in the program under Forest Service sponsorship.

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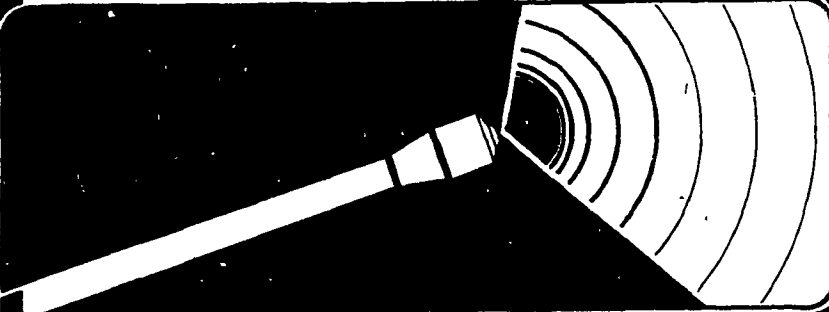
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