We’ve all heard the saying, “age is just a number,” and while that’s great for celebrating birthdays, the fact of the matter is that for the American workforce, age is much more than just a number–it is a potential looming crisis. It is of course no secret that, the U.S. workforce is getting older, but the rate at which workers are getting older is alarming and astonishing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, around 10,000 baby boomers in the United States will turn 65 every day until the year 2030.\(^1\) Conceptualized in a different manner, every month, more than a quarter-million Americans celebrate their 65th birthday.\(^2\) To give this some perspective, if you filled MetLife stadium, (home of the NY Giants and NY Jets and the largest stadium in the NFL), to full-seating capacity not once, not twice, but just over three times, that is how many American workers are getting set to retire each month. As author Phillip Moeller indicates, “the aging American workplace will likely emerge as one of the dominant economic and human interest stories of the next 10 to 20 years.”\(^3\) This article seeks to look at how the aging workforce and silver tsunami has prompted public and private sectors alike, including Safebuilt, to proactively plan for this looming workforce challenge.

**THE “SILVER TSUNAMI”: A MOUNTING CONCERN**

For over a decade now, there have been indications of a “silver tsunami” among public employees. Liz Farmer in a December 2013 Governing magazine article titled, “The Public Employee ‘Silver Tsunami’ Looms for Governments,” describes the silver tsunami as “a sudden wave of baby boomer retirements that could potentially cripple the American workforce.”\(^4\) By and large, this “wave” has not yet reached the beach so to speak. This is partially due to the recent recession and a slow economic recovery. But rest assured, it’s coming. The current conditions delaying the silver tsunami won’t last long. With the large number of employees becoming retirement eligible and retirement paperwork stacking up at the local and state level, governments are already reporting signs that the tide is rising.

Every month, more than a quarter-million Americans celebrate their 65th birthday

Farmer explains that, “Public administration experts express concern that the governments are ill prepared. If they aren’t ready, agencies risk permanently losing decades of expertise, eroding their ability to serve the public for years to come.”\(^5\)

**PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE**

As bleak as the U.S. demographics look, there are some reasons for optimism. Some communities and states have taken steps to prepare for this rising tide and have implemented some unique tools and ideas to help plan. One of the most integral aspects of succession planning is focusing on knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer ensures that the loss of experience and institutional knowledge accompanying the departure of baby boomers in the workforce is minimal. A formal plan in place for the transferring of knowledge can go a long way in allowing local governments to avoid watching decades of experience go out the window. Communities that have training programs and tools in place are well situated
to have their successors hit the ground running after retirements.

Such is the case in Fort Collins, CO where the utilities department became alarmed two years ago when they learned they would be losing a record number of long-term employees to retirements over the next 10 years. Knowing this, the department implemented a two-phase plan. According to Heather Kerrigan author of Government Unprepared for Boomers’ Mass Exodus, “The first phase pinpointed core competencies for various positions, assessed areas of risk within the workforce including both age and organizational structure, and identified the tools and opportunities to mitigate these risks. In phase two, a five year plan was developed which included decisions about how to train its workforce for the jobs that will be important in the future.” This phase includes a tool called the “expert interview” in which a consultant is brought in to interview identified senior leaders to learn about the ins-and-outs of their job with the idea that this knowledge is disseminated out moving forward.

The state of Washington recognized the issues of an aging workforce early, and in the late 1990s began developing a road map to deal with the issues and difficulties of knowledge transfer and succession planning. According to Kerrigan, “the state's approach is unique in that it doesn't rely on enterprise wide succession planning. Rather Washington goes agency by agency because of the differing employment dynamics.” By starting ahead of the game, Washington seems to have an advantage in knowing what to look for in terms of future workforce.

Yet another example of planning for change in the workforce demographic comes out of Sarasota County, Florida. Farmer writes that, “The County administers a yearlong program to groom its leaders and fills more roles on an interim basis, allowing departments to better train managers. The public safety communications manager, for example, will retire [next year], so the county hired an employee to train for the position for eight months.”

Programs like this are instrumental in curtailing the effects of the silver tsunami because despite the fact that more tenured American workers are extending their careers, large numbers of baby boomers are still getting set to retire. Finding enough new workers will be a growing challenge for many employers over the coming years.

**BRIDGING THE BABY BOOMER GAP**

Heidi Voorhees, president of the local government consulting firm Voorhees Associates, says local governments are already witnessing age-related labor shortage in the areas of public finance and public works. To deal with this gap, many governments look to promote younger employees to fill slots vacated by senior staff. Voorhees explains that these positions hit the ground running with the help of one-on-one mentoring arrangements typically lasting a few months. “That’s where baby boomers come in. If they don’t want to call it quits just yet, there are opportunities for boomers to train younger workers set to take their place.”

SAFEbuilt personally understands this dilemma and has begun to see the impact of the “silver tsunami.” In 2012 the Bureau of Labor Statistics released a list of the top occupations with the oldest job holders. Construction and building inspectors were high on that list. The building industry fields approximately 118,000 jobs, with 44.5% of those workers aged 55 years or older and 7.6% age 65 years or older. This means that in addition to areas like public works and
finance, local building departments across the country are going to struggle with replacing positions, that for decades, have been held by baby boomers. To further aggravate this dilemma, during the recent recession, the development community suffered job losses at previously unheard of levels. Many contractors, inspectors, architects, planners and engineers were forced to relocate or even leave the profession. The result of these merging issues is that now – during a period of increased development activity – local governments have fewer staff to manage a rapidly increasing workload while also having a more difficult time finding qualified people to hire into new positions.

THE SAFE BUILT TRAINING PROGRAM

Aware of the issues already mentioned and the changing state of the industry, SAFEbuilt looked to put together an apprenticeship program that would help meet a growing need to find and train talented people. Developing a training program is nothing new. Companies began to create them in droves in the 1990s in hopes of attracting new grads and fresh talent to their ranks. The team decided that now was the time to develop an in-house program that would educate and mentor the next generation. It is a program aimed at growing a group of trained professionals who can learn from the cumulative years of experience already on staff. This comprehensive program helps new recruits get up to speed and learn the industry – not just the certifications and education required, but also the reality in the field and soft skills from those who have been practicing for the past 40 years. Incorporating a 360 degree view of the development industry as well as the core values that distinguish SAFEbuilt, the hope is for the initiative to not only help the company meet the needs for the future, but also revitalize interest in the many career paths associated with the development industry.

For SAFEbuilt, the training program boils down to a plan for weathering the silver tsunami. In this manner, the company is prepared to replace retiring staff to ensure their client communities continue to receive the highest level of service. Cities and towns in a partnership with SAFEbuilt can rest assured that even while the silver tsunami statistics continue to grow and loom overhead, they will not be left in the dark scrambling to find qualified community development professionals.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The idea is to have individuals mentored and supported throughout the process as they learn the vital codes and ordinances that protect life safety as well as quality of life.

As a company, there are three simple goals through the Training Program:

1) Recruit
2) Train
3) Retain

In order to successfully achieve each of these goals, the company has created a detailed curriculum with several modules that will help each trainee get the needed exposure in every area of the business. In addition, they will be given ample time to prepare for exams.
As one SAFEbuilt manager recently put it, “They’ll have a lot on their plates to balance, but they have all of SAFEbuilt standing behind them to make sure they get what they need to succeed.” SAFEbuilt expects to start producing qualified individuals within the next year or so and backfill their spots with new Trainees. In this way, the company will have an ongoing pool of qualified talent to fill permanent positions so they are always well suited to best serve their over 200 client communities.

“They’ll have a lot on their plates to balance, but they have all of SAFEbuilt standing behind them to make sure they get what they need to succeed.”

At the end of the day, the Training Program is about helping groom the next generation of building inspectors, code enforcement officers and plans examiners when some state and local governments may not have weathered the economic downturn well enough to preserve internships and apprenticeship, entry-level positions. Training the next wave of inspectors, plans examiners and code enforcement officers ultimately helps local community development departments better meet the challenges of staffing and budgeting while navigating the tumultuous waters that the silver tsunami is creating.

THE SILVER TSUNAMI SILVER LINING

Many top managers and department directors are already preparing for retirement. Have you polled your management staff about their intentions? By the year 2025, millennials will make up 75% of the American workforce. This statistic alone should be enough to urge local governments to plan for attracting younger employees and training them for leadership positions. The silver tsunami is often depicted as a looming crisis. Watching American workers age at an alarming rate is reason for concern. However, with the right strategic plan and programs in place and the proper training and education on how to brace for the “tsunami,” an optimist could argue that this economic phenomenon is an opportunity for millennials and baby boomers to bridge their generational differences and work together to help their local communities become a better and safer place to live, work and play.

ABOUT SAFEBUILT

SAFEbuilt was founded in 1992 for the sole purpose of providing exceptional building department services to local governments. Today, SAFEbuilt is one of the leading providers of community development department services in the country—partnering with over 200 communities of all shapes and sizes throughout the country for the efficient delivery of privatized community development department solutions. These solutions include: building department services, community and transportation planning & zoning and community improvement services (such as code enforcement and rental programs), in both short- and long-term engagements to public agencies. Our team of dedicated experts has worked closely with local governments for over 22 years to meet their communities’ unique needs by offering a customized approach that provides proven best practices, expert personnel and improved service levels.


