

Senior Centers

Their Relevancy and Impact on the Social Needs of Older Adults

Introduction

AS the baby boom generation ages, the challenges of meeting their needs become more complex not only because of their numbers but also because boomers are a heterogeneous group. These multipurpose centers have evolved into places where older people can improve or maintain many aspects of life all in one place. They not only offer meaningful activities for a diverse group of older adults, but also provide an important source of referrals, which keeps them connected to the community. However, this very diversity has also created debate over what functions senior centers best perform. On the one hand, they provide services for those in need; on the other hand, they provide recreational activities for people who are healthy and economically self-sufficient (Krout 1989). This has led to the question of which services are most needed and which populations should be the focus of programs and services. This issue brief presents the findings from a previous study conducted by the author, which focuses on participation levels and opportunities at a nationally accredited senior center in Florida.

Senior center attendance can be viewed as a continuum, ranging from limited activity to intense involvement (Ferraro and Cobb 1987; Krout 1988), which not only varies across individuals but for a given individual over time. From the multi-method study of senior center participation— participant observation, interviews, and surveys— the results suggested that a senior center can be an effective institution if it creates a unique space and an unordered approach to activities on a continuing basis. This allows different types of seniors to benefit, regardless of their health, economic situation, and level of involvement.

Social Interaction in Senior Centers

Research has consistently found there to be a positive association between social relationships and well-being (Pinquart and Soerensen 2000; Street et al. 2007; Stevens et al. 2006; Tomaka et al. 2006). More specifically, findings suggest that friendship is an important predictor of well-being for older people because it helps alleviate feelings of loneliness and keeps them from being socially isolated (Aday, Kehoe, and Farney 2006; Payne et al. 2006).

Senior centers can offer a place for social interaction on many different levels, including

involvement in activities and classes, or through volunteering. In addition, because there are different levels of social involvement, various types of people can fill their need to socialize, whether they are retired and looking for a new community, still working yet have extra time to meet people and learn new skills, or have never worked and enjoy the social camaraderie through the activities. Finally, a senior center can provide a place for those individuals that want to interact with peers who share similar interests, experiences, and beliefs. Therefore, it is important that senior centers continue to provide diverse programs that can maximize the benefits of participation.

Characteristics of the Older Adult Population

It is essential to know the characteristics of the general older adult population. By knowing who they are, senior centers can then serve them effectively. Each cohort shows certain inclinations of a lifestyle that are particular to the influences that shaped their formative years. More specifically, these preferences shape the interests, needs, and behaviors of what participants will want from a senior center (Beisgen and Kraitchman 2003).

The social agency model suggests that senior center programs were designed to meet the survival needs of the more disadvantaged individuals, who are more likely to need and use the senior centers. The voluntary organizational model suggests that senior

center activities offer opportunity for self-expression and recreation, and thus, are more likely to attract participants who are self-sufficient and more active in their communities (Schneider, Chapman, and Voth 1985). Studies consistently find that both models play a role in senior center participation. Local samples often have distinct personalities and characteristics depending on the place. Therefore, results from one senior center may not be representative of the broader population. Despite this, by knowing who the typical participants are in an area allows for the senior center to provide appropriate services and programs that are specific to that population.

Levels of Senior Center Participation

The different levels of participation are measured by frequency, duration, stability, and amount of activity involvement (Krout 1989). The *frequency* of senior center attendance refers to how often an individual attends the center. There are three different variables that measure *duration* of attendance. First, is how long the participant has been attending the center, measured in terms of months. The second measures how long they usually stay at the center each visit. The third variable measures how long they usually socialize with others at the center when not in an activity. *Stability* of attendance refers to changes over time in the frequency of attendance—whether the level has stayed the same, increased, or decreased. *Amount of activity involvement* refers to the number of different activities a

participant is involved in at the center. Overall, there is a large amount of variation in the frequency, duration, stability, and amount of activity involvement at senior centers. The levels of involvement continuously change depending on the types of activities that are offered at the center, the availability of the participants, and what the participants want to gain from attending activities at the center.

Services Important to Participants

Services provided that are deemed important, and specific gains from attending senior centers vary by participant. In terms of service information, the study survey asked how important it was that the senior center provides the participant with information about specific services (health care coverage, where to get legal help, employment opportunities, nutritional advice, social services, transportation services, volunteer opportunities, long-term care, home services). Respondents' replies suggested that information about health care coverage, where to get legal help, nutritional advice, and volunteer opportunities are considered to be important to them. Overall, there are four services in which information from the senior center is not important to the participants—employment opportunities, social services, transportation services, and home services.

Benefits of Participation

The various types of gains, found in the study, from attending the senior center were grouped

into five categories— social, psychological support, physical health, activities, and spirituality. *Social* factors include making new friends, belonging to a group, and maintaining friendships while at the center. *Psychological support* consists of bereavement, relaxation, support with problems, and improving mental health. *Physical health* includes improving physical health, staying physically active, and eating healthy meals. *Activities* consist of learning new ideas/skills, having fun, someplace to go, and keeping busy. *Spirituality* includes helping with spiritual beliefs.

The results suggest that the top five things people want to gain from participating at a senior center are having fun (94%), learning new ideas/skills (87%), making new friends (86%), relaxation (85%), and belonging to a group (84%). The factors listed as least important are “support with problems,” “bereavement,” and “helping with spiritual beliefs.” These results illustrate that participants want to gain different things when attending the senior center and involvement at the center can benefit them in various ways by providing a large assortment of activities.

Concluding Remarks

The findings regarding services that actually matter to participants, and knowing what they expect to gain, have significant value for professionals in the field. For policy makers, this data can provide important information about how they can effectively continue to

support the older adult population (Krout 1988, 1989). It can also assist practitioners in identifying needs of participants, and thus facilitate the selection of appropriate programming and staffing for the future.

With the baby boom generation now entering retirement age, ideas of what a senior center should include will change. Therefore, senior center professionals will need to continue to study who these participants are and why they participate. In addition, they will need to be able to respond to the interests of current and future participants by continuing to develop and change as this generation grows older. Advances in our understanding of senior center participation are necessary, not only if we want to continue to appropriately serve current participants, but also to attract new ones.

Staying relevant to a changing older demographic may be challenging. However, it is important to do so because, as discussed in this brief, senior centers offer meaningful activities for a diverse group of older adults, and can be an important element in their lives.

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