

SENIOR CENTER INNOVATIONS

CONCEPT PAPER

6/27/11

Introduction

Though the times are difficult in California the resiliency of the state's senior centers continues to be evident in their innovations, resourcefulness and dreams. From creative programming to community partnerships, centers are breaking new ground in ways that strengthen their role in the community and will help them survive and thrive. In recognition of that spirit of innovation, the CCoA will take the lead in producing and distributing a publication containing big ideas that show how some centers are meeting the challenge of these difficult times. This publication will include a compilation of vignettes from around California demonstrating that centers are embracing paradigm and program shifts, moving forward with strategic plans and allowing their creativity to shine despite the economic realities facing their communities.

The ideas presented in the compilation will be thoughtful, replicable, sustainable and often "outside the box." The innovations we choose to highlight may be at different stages of evolution. Regardless, they represent some examples of the best of California Senior Centers.

Definition of a Senior Center

Senior centers are designated as community focal points through the Older Americans Act. The National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) defines a senior center as a place where "older adults come together for services and activities that reflect their experience and skills, respond to their diverse needs and interests, enhance their dignity, support their independence, and encourage their involvement in and with the center and the community."

Since many senior centers have completed name changes in recent years – we will use the terms "senior centers" and "centers" interchangeably in this concept paper.

Historically centers have been viewed as the community's focal point for older adult services. They are often the trusted first point of entry for assistance and support to older adults and/or their families and caregivers. Centers are the mechanism most often used to access the community's available resources.

Services offered at Centers

While senior centers typically provide nutrition, recreation, social programs, educational services, and comprehensive information and referral service, many centers are adding new programs such as fitness activities and internet training to meet the needs and

interests of the new generation of seniors. Some centers embrace multiple generation activities and others offer case management programs, long-term care ombudsman services and operate adult day health care centers.

Senior centers also serve as focal points in the community where a collaboration of agencies can provide services onsite to their target populations, with staff and support systems that maximize the opportunity to assist the population to age successfully.

In many cases centers are utilized by persons of various ages. The people who participate in senior center activities are as diverse as the communities in which they reside.

Senior Centers in California

Since 2008, the Congress of California Seniors (CCS) has maintained an electronic listing of the senior centers in California. As of June 2011, the CCS website contains 790 listings for centers in the state. The listing includes nutrition-only sites which do not necessarily meet the criteria for senior centers identified above.

In California, senior centers generally fall under the jurisdiction of local governments or operate as non-profit agencies. A review of CCS' data shows that 56% of the centers are operated by local governments.

In addition to operational differences, there is great diversity in California's senior centers, including level of services and range of programs provided, ethnicity, staffing levels, funding sources, volunteer opportunities, hours of operation, organizational structure, technology use, ease of access and utilization.

There are two senior center organizations in California: the Aging and Activities Section of the California Park and Recreation Society and the California Association of Senior Service Centers.

Where Are Centers Today?

Like all aspects of society, centers are very much aware that a demographic shift is approaching. In the past decade centers across the state have considered and implemented options that would make their offerings appealing to the "new senior" of tomorrow.

In an effort to better plan for the baby boomer population, over 300 center representatives gathered in 2009 at the first-ever statewide *Senior Center Stakeholder Forum*. One of the activities of the Forum was the creation of new "vision statements" for centers to utilize in the future. .

However, while most centers have the desire to plan for future customers, the realities of California's current economic situation have forced most of their recent attention on budget reductions, service prioritization and meeting the immediate needs of today's older adults. Most feel they are asked to do "more with less." Some centers have reduced staff and/or hours; a few centers have actually closed.

Against this backdrop of uncertainty, the California Commission on Aging (CCoA) began hearing exciting stories about centers that were demonstrating resiliency, strengthening programs, designing new operations, holding strategic planning sessions and moving innovations forward.

Compilation of Senior Center Innovations

The CCoA will take the lead in compiling a summation of senior center innovations throughout California for publication and distribution to relevant stakeholders. A collection of innovative ideas is a way to celebrate and share the unique contributions of centers and to help ensure they remain a vital and critical part of the state's aging network. The senior center innovation project is remarkable in that, to our knowledge, no other state has completed such a project. The project may be especially valuable to fragile or struggling centers.

The CCoA will identify 30 - 50 senior centers for inclusion in the summation. Using a graduate level gerontology student intern and staff, the CCoA will schedule and conduct phone interviews with each identified center. From that interview a one page narrative, or vignette, would be developed. Each narrative page would include a descriptive statement about the center and contact information, the vignette and possibly a photo.

Rationale

The creation of a compilation of senior center innovations will provide the following:

- A venue for stakeholders to share innovative ideas and to illustrate projects that may be replicated.
- A connections across the senior center network and stimulate further discussion on creative solutions to many of the challenges that senior centers experience.
- A showcase of the value of centers and the role they play in their communities, increasing their visibility in this challenging environment.
- A marketing tool that may be used for advocacy, fundraising and collaborative efforts with business leaders and potential partners in each local community.

In addition, centers that incorporated ideas learned from the 2009 Forum into their strategic planning and/or program outcomes will be specially recognized.

Selection Criteria

The CCoA will work with senior center organizations, the California Association of Area Agencies on Aging and others in the aging network to identify centers that are doing innovative work in areas of governance, financing, facilities, collaborations, humanities, healthcare, wellness, etc. A call for centers to “self nominate” will also be distributed. Entries should exhibit replicability, creativity, innovation, sustainability and deliver a positive impact on the older adult population. Our final product will be sensitive to diversity, geography, administrative jurisdiction, ethnicity, and impacts on underserved populations.

Distribution

The publication will be distributed at the-second Statewide Senior Center Stakeholder Forum to be held in Los Angeles on November 14, 2011 and will be available on the CCoA website. Forum partners and sponsors will receive a copy. Copies may also be sent to other center stakeholders, media, foundations, key legislators and other government officials. At the local level centers may want to share the documents with governing boards, municipalities, and potential funding partners.

Post Report Activities

Should the list of centers with innovations exceed our capacity to include all submissions in the report to be distributed in November. The CCoA will consider the development of a one-page template based on the model used for the published narratives for each additional center. A copy of the template will be sent to the identified center for use in their marketing and fundraising efforts and also posted on the CCoA website.