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## Leading Tomorrow's Senior Centers

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### Aging Together

American society has traditionally desired “quick fixes” such as prescription drugs to treat physical and mental health conditions, which may contribute to the one-third of older adults over the age of 65 who lead sedentary lifestyles.<sup>1</sup> However, a growing body of research suggests that disease-prevention approaches and healthier behaviors can offer longer-term societal and economic benefits. Senior centers can enhance individuals’ health-behavior change through preventive approaches and high-quality programs.

Given today’s fiscal environment, senior centers may be interested in learning more about economically savvy approaches to promoting healthy lifestyles through community-based programs and services known to prevent the onset of chronic conditions and risk of injury. The participation in health-promoting and disease-preventing programs will further assist older adults in overcoming barriers to mobility and transportation, maintaining independence, and achieving better overall health and well-being.

One economical, community-based approach is to expand upon existing health programs offered at senior centers through the use of education resources developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Aging (NIA), National Council on Aging (NCOA), National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC)



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Administration on Aging (AOA), and the Alzheimer's Association. By incorporating these educational tools into existing health and wellness programs, senior centers might be better equipped to expand their health-promotion messages without having to "reinvent the wheel," thus saving time and money in program development. NCOA also hosts a valuable resource for senior center directors to exchange ideas about program development and senior center-related topics through the NCOA Discussion Forum—a social network created specifically for senior center professionals.<sup>2</sup>

### Health-Promotion Programs

The implementation of physical, mental, and social health programs as well as health, wellness, and support services can help older adults increase their ability to live independently as long as possible, decrease individual and national healthcare costs, and improve the overall accessibility and availability of programs. Currently, healthcare costs associated with obesity have risen to about \$117 billion annually, a clear indication that sedentary lifestyles are far too prevalent among the national population.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to fight the obesity epidemic among the nation's older population, many senior centers offer physical fitness activities through various programs, such as certified instructor-led exercise classes (e.g., chair exercises, aerobics, water aerobics, dance classes, organized walking groups), educational-enrichment classes that emphasize the benefits of participating in physical activities, and providing a fitness facility to accommodate cardio- and strength-training equipment for members.

Older adults who engage in physical activity on a regular basis have a reduced risk of falling. Those who have experienced a fall are more subject to increased risk of mortality, fear of falling, and social isolation. Additionally, participation in physical fitness activities has been shown to reduce the development of hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes,<sup>4</sup> and decrease the risk of developing dementia by half for those who start exercising in their 60s<sup>5</sup>—all of which represent substantial healthcare expenditures.



In addition to older-adult physical fitness programs, health and geriatric professionals are becoming increasingly focused on "mental fitness." While epidemiological researchers have made significant strides in combating dementia and Alzheimer's, increased awareness also has stimulated greater concern for the devastating outcomes of these illnesses. Increasing the opportunities for older adults to engage in mental fitness, such as training in cognitive skills and problem-solving strategies, can enhance their fluid intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, programs that couple physical activity with mental fitness have the potential to improve executive function among older adults.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the best-determined method for decreasing the adverse effects of poor mental health is to increase brain stimulation and activity through various tasks that can be easily incorporated into daily activities. For example, some senior centers offer instructor-led computer classes with increasing skill levels (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced), foreign language classes, health education, consumer information, and writing classes (e.g., grammar, poetry, creative writing), and monthly book clubs. Partnerships that build upon existing community-based health-education programs are likely to have a greater impact on people's quality of life and health care costs.

Research also suggests that individuals who have participated in leisure activities of an intellectual or social nature have a 38 percent lower risk of developing dementia.<sup>7</sup>

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Furthermore, the need for social interaction among older adults is similar to that of their younger cohorts.<sup>8</sup> Older adults may shift their interests in social activity over time, but they continue to desire social contact whether it is through visiting with peers, family members, grandchildren, or presence in a social environment.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the connection to a community setting, such as a senior center, helps older adults more successfully carry out activities of daily living.<sup>9</sup>

Senior centers, policymakers, and healthcare leaders can collaborate to provide supportive health resources to older adults through various services, such as organized health lectures and discussions, transportation services, nutrition programs, and wellness programs that create a greater awareness among older adults about the risk factors and preventative measures for common chronic illnesses affecting the respective population. An example of a fairly recent health, wellness, and support opportunity for senior centers is the *Prescription for Better Health* program. Through this program NCOA and CVS collaboratively work with senior centers across the nation to help older adults manage their health by providing education classes, health screenings, and improved benefits access.<sup>10</sup> *Prescription for Better Health* is available at no cost, which encourages senior centers to take advantage of this program opportunity during tough economic times.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, senior nutrition programs have received federal recognition through the release of American Restoration and Recovery Act funding to support the continued provision of meals to older adults through senior centers (\$65 million) and home-delivered nutrition services (\$32 million).<sup>11</sup> It is through the participation in health-promotion and preventative services, such as health-supportive services, that individuals are able to maintain healthier lifestyles while reducing their health care costs.

## Multimodal Programming

Senior center programs that promote several health constructs simultaneously, such as physical, mental, and social

health, provide more organizational efficiency and greater opportunities for participants to engage in a balanced approach to improving health, as compared to programs that only target a single dimension of health. This multimodal approach enables health benefits to be obtained through the implementation of fewer programs. The following programs exemplify the practicality of incorporating several health dimensions into one program,



consequently providing a more feasible option for those who are limited in both time and money.

NCOA's *Brain Fitness for Older Adults* encourages fitness instructors to mix physical activity with mental fitness, so that older adults are able to improve both their physical and cognitive function.<sup>12</sup> The Alzheimer's Association's *Maintain Your Brain*<sup>®</sup> campaign promotes a "brain-healthy lifestyle" for older adults by regularly engaging this population in mentally, socially, and physically stimulating activities as well as helping them maintain a low-fat diet rich in fruits and vegetables.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Delaware Mental Fitness Coalition's *Brain Connections* program not only promotes the maintenance of healthy cognitive function but also strives to connect individuals within the community, thus focusing on the enhancement of both mental and social health.<sup>14</sup> Research also shows that social

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support is positively associated with regular physical activity.<sup>4</sup> Programs that incorporate several dimensions, such as physical, mental, and social health, are ideal since they focus on achieving a balance of these dimensions that promote greater well-being.

## Summary

Senior centers, policymakers, and community members each play a vital role in the successful aging of Delaware's older adults. The modern focus of aging no longer remains on increasing the quantity of years, but rather on enhancing the *quality* of years lived through a balance of physical, mental, and social health behaviors.

By collectively working toward creating a greater quality of life for older adults through collaborative health-promotion and disease-prevention efforts, older adults are more likely to lead healthier, more independent lives—a goal that many hope to achieve in their later years. NCOA encourages partnerships among academic institutions, healthcare and public-health entities, and community leaders to achieve long-term health outcomes for older adults through community-based services.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with NCOA's recommendations, senior centers can take collaborative approaches in the delivery of health-promotion programs and services. Senior centers that offer high-quality physical fitness programs (through a fitness center and/or certified instructor-based classes), but weaker mental-health programs can partner with centers who offer regular health and wellness screenings and credible health-education programs but fewer physical fitness activities.

As Delaware's 65-and-older population increases, it is important that individuals have access to an array of services that promote physical activity, mental fitness, social health, and overall health, wellness, and support. The provision of health-promotion and disease-prevention

programs and services (e.g., supportive services, transportation, and multimodal programming) is essential for effectively enhancing the health of the senior population while reducing the burden of their healthcare costs. The aging of the baby boomers is an inevitable reality, but one that can be embraced by the community through a new wave of collective health-support provisions and service-delivery approaches.

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