

California Senior Center Infrastructure Survey Summary Report 2009

CCoA EXECUTIVE BRIEF

The Congress of California Seniors (CCS)¹ joined with the California Commission on Aging (CCoA)² to document the infrastructure needs of California's senior centers. The senior center infrastructure survey was conducted in 2009 with a focus on current needs and demographic changes.

Introduction

The study consisted of a six page paper-based survey mailed to over 770 senior centers across California. The list of senior centers was identified by the CCS. Three hundred and ninety-eight surveys were received for a response rate of 51.4%. Out of California's 58 counties, surveys were received from the 57 counties where multipurpose senior centers are located. Nearly all counties had a response rate of 40% or above.

The intent of the survey was to develop a profile of centers in California, including senior center demographics, current services provided, capacity of the facilities, preparedness for natural disasters, telecommunications, accessibility, maintenance needs and energy utilization. The results of the survey will be used, in part, to examine the need for a statewide bond initiative similar to the California Senior Center Bond Act of 1984.

Center Demographics & Governance

The senior centers that responded to the survey have been operational for an average of 25.5 years. The centers were primarily multipurpose senior centers (83%). Eleven percent of the respondents were centers that provide nutrition services plus limited programming. The remaining responding centers offered activity based programs only.

¹ The CCS is a statewide non-profit advocacy organization formed in 1977 to work on behalf of seniors in California. The CCS operates a website for senior centers www.calseniorcenters.org and maintains an electronic list of California centers.

² The CCoA is an independent agency whose purpose in state government is to serve as the principle advocate for older Californians. In 2008 the CCoA launched a Senior Center initiative. More information can be found at www.ccoa.ca.gov

While the majority of the senior centers in California are operated by a municipality, the responding centers were primarily nonprofit agencies (50%). The second most common governance was city government at 39%, followed by county government at 8%.

Center Operations: Personnel, Budget, and Services

Responding senior centers had an average of nine paid employees – with a range between no paid employees and 180 paid employees. Senior centers rely on the services of volunteers in all aspects of their operations. Responding centers indicated having a mean of 73.5 volunteers. The annual number of volunteer hours donated to these centers ranged between zero and 500,000 hours, resulting in a mean of just over 10,300 volunteer hours per center.

An indication of the diversity of senior centers in California is the size of the operating budgets; the average center budget was \$1.9 million. The centers reported annual operating budgets between zero and \$54 million. Respondents were also asked about their centers' budget changes over the past five years when compared to costs and demands for services. Just over a quarter indicated a budgetary increase, 37% indicated they had kept pace, 43% indicated a decline, and 5% did not respond to the question.

Declining revenues have had an impact on center personnel as well. Forty eight percent of respondents have had to lay off staff or reduce key services over the past five years. Nearly a quarter of the respondents indicated their centers are in danger of being closed due to decreased funding.

The majority of centers (71%) provide services at only one site or location. For those agencies operating multiple sites, the average number of sites per agency is two. Nearly 60% of the centers own the building where their services are provided.

California senior centers offer a significant variety and range of services. However, there was some consistency in the top five service categories, which include:

- activities, including socialization
- information and referral/assistance
- meal programs
- fitness/exercise/wellness classes
- education/instruction classes

Center Maintenance & Accessibility

The Senior Center Bond Act of 1984 directed funding for center acquisition, renovation, and construction. Many of these centers are now 25 years old. Twenty one percent of the respondents indicated they have deferred major

maintenance on their centers. Another 24% report having minor deferred maintenance.

Nearly 8% of the centers indicated there are safety issues with their buildings as a result of deferred maintenance, including leaky roofs, stairway and walkway hazards and mold problems.

Senior centers are required to comply with federal accessibility laws. Over 93% of the center respondents have ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant entry ways and 91% have accessible restrooms. Over half of the centers reported having undergone an ADA compliance inspection, most within the past three years.

Center Utilities & Energy

In responding to questions about telecommunications equipment and capability, 8% of centers do not have internet access to any of their computers. Additionally, 40% indicated they did not have a sufficient number of computers for their staff and volunteers.

Many older Californians visit a senior center for computer use or classes. Over half the centers that responded to the survey have computers available for seniors to use; however 50% of these indicated they do not have a sufficient supply of computers or they are outdated.

Thirty percent of the respondents have had an energy audit within the past four years. However, more than half of the centers do not have any double pane windows. In addition, 23% indicated their centers are not adequately weatherized or insulated.

Centers and Disaster Preparedness

Natural disasters, a frequent occurrence in California, have an impact on senior center facilities, services, and clients. A vast majority of the centers (nearly 84%) have created a disaster or security preparedness plan. In addition, 53% are set up to provide shelter during times of disaster.

Almost 54% of the respondents are located within earthquake zones. Only 40% of the centers have undergone an earthquake retrofit. In addition, 29% are in areas vulnerable to wild fires and 14% are in flood prone areas.

Conclusion

Seniors Centers are known as community focal points and are often the trusted first point of contact for older Californians and their families. This survey confirms that California is home to a variety of senior center models and facilities. A few

centers in California are over 100 years old; many were supported with the 1984 Senior Center Bond Act; a significant number are newly constructed community centers and several others are under construction.

Many centers, especially those operated by a local government, are struggling in the current fiscal environment, including being forced to reduce staff, shorten hours and eliminate programs. Most centers rely on volunteers who perform a variety of functions. Such dependence will undoubtedly continue.

Overall many centers have positioned themselves to be ready for the anticipated demographic change and are fully accessible, energy efficient hi-tech multipurpose activity centers. Too many others have deferred maintenance, are in need of infrastructure assistance, operating programs in buildings that are too small, unsafe, or in dire need of repair. Two-thirds of the centers are in need of weatherization assistance. Eight percent of California centers do not have internet access.

Centers are full community partners when it comes to preparing for disaster situations by developing response plans and working with other agencies to provide shelter and food services.

The results of this study speak to the wide variation in how communities and local governments view their senior centers. The data create a strong case for expanding community support for the critical services senior centers provide.