

Senior Centers: Demonstrating Impact & Relevance

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Purpose of Senior Centers

To understand Evidence-Based outcomes, we need to change the way we view Senior Centers. We must think of Senior Centers and the benefits that they provide in their totality. The Senior Center is the evidence as a whole model.

There are about 12,000 Senior Centers nationwide but yet not one study to show what people get from their participation at a senior center.

Question:

What do service providers feel is the purpose of Senior Centers? Break up into small groups and come up with a 2-3 sentence answer that you could give to a potential funder.

Participant Answers:

- Enhance the quality of life, dignity and independence of older adults through socialization, recreational activities and resources
- Enhance the health and mental well-being of individuals through socialization, recreation and information and referral services
- Nutritional programs, bingo, dancing, inter-generational activities, volunteer and socialization opportunities that all lead to the general well-being of older adults
- To improve mental and physical well-being of all seniors
- To enrich and support independent living of older adults
- A place for older adults to gather for nutritional, educational, recreational and informational services
- Focal point for connections
- A place where services are based on the needs of seniors and where outreach is conducted to connect seniors with those services
- To promote independence, well-being and improve quality of life of older adults
- To define the second phase of adulthood
- A one-stop shop for seniors to thrive as a community within a community
- To provide a social connection that magnifies the role/importance of “third agers” in a community
- To say that Senior Centers give people independence and dignity is patronizing. Their purpose is to provide seniors socialization opportunities.
- To provide a healthy environments for social contact, physical and intellectual stimulation, healthy living and advocacy

-Enrich lives of older adults through health & wellness to maintain independent and active lives within a community

-Senior Centers are a gathering place and safety net of assistance to help older adults age in place

“Devil’s Advocate” (Opposing views to consider)

-Why does the government have to pay for Senior Centers?

-Why can’t a Senior go to a gym, a church, another avenue for the services mentioned: physical activity, socialization, etc.?

-Why can’t these services be provided in a different/cheaper way?

-What type of quality services do Senior Centers offer that create a unique and effective model?

Answers:

Senior Centers are the only avenue for older adults to access these vital services

Other participant answers:

-Senior Centers are professional environments with services provided by experts in a centralized manner.

-Senior Centers are a safe place to get services in an ageist society.

-Services are affordable or free.

-The passage of the Older Americans Act allowed for the creation of Senior Centers (by funding the physical building of centers) and by developing a profession and variety of services that are tailored to a specific population.

-Senior Centers create a sense of community in a safe place that is created for people that receive validation as a result of their existence.

-Senior Center services provide a level of prevention of mental and physical harm that is cheaper than rest homes and that ultimately delay institutionalization.

Question: What makes the above points different when we consider today’s circumstances (Baby Boomers)? We can take as example the survey results in New York City. Seniors, both participants and those that do not attend a Senior Center, were surveyed through questionnaires and focus groups and asked why they attend. Answers:

-Socialization

-Friendships

-“Something to do”

-To learn about health topics

-To experience new things

- To obtain information about services
- For health screenings and workshops
- Nutrition

Side note: People surveyed will check off “Nutrition” as one of the top 5 reasons they attend a Senior Center, however, they will not typically write it in as an answer.

Side notes on the Older Americans Act:

Prior to 1965, there were few Senior Centers in existence. 1965 was a landmark year with the passing of the OAA, as it allowed for the physical creation of Senior Centers.

Seniors Today (younger older adults)

- Non-participants say that they don’t want to be committed to a five day attendance program- they have more choices for activities
- The idea of a center within four walls is confining

Demonstrating Impact

If these points are true, and prevention is cost effective, we must demonstrate this through data in order to secure continued and future funding.

Program Outcomes Evaluation- 3 types

- goal based
- process based
- outcomes based- start here. Evaluate one program at a time

Why are program evaluations helpful? Why should you evaluate your programs?

The government funding sources have shifted drastically from highlighting services to showing tangible results. Showing results will affect future funding. Foundations also look at funding in a scientific manner. Outputs vs. outcomes.

Evaluation Tools

Surveys, Focus groups and pre/post tests are a great start

Developing and Outcomes Evaluation Plan

Identify a goal→objectives→services→specific outcome

- Qualitative and Quantitative data will result of this process
- Today’s reality is that funders will determine outcomes for grantees that don’t define their own outcomes
- Current focus of funders: Increased knowledge and Change in behavior (of your participant)

Tips

-Begin with 5 basic questions:

-Why do you attend?

-How does this program help you?

-Why do you think you need this service?

-What benefit are you getting out of your participation?

-What would you be doing if you were not coming in?

-Goal: Develop 1 questionnaire about the general purpose of your center –OR- 1 questionnaire about one program/service offered

-CONSISTENCY- gather data periodically and stick to it. Do not attempt to gather data under crisis

-Process doesn't have to be scientific

-Train staff to be part of the process

-Start small