INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information on senior centers and clubs, more specifically, the role of recreation in senior centers and clubs. Topics discussed in this chapter include the history and background of senior centers and clubs, goals and objectives of senior centers, a rationale for recreation as a component of senior center programs, the population served, description of the senior center setting, considerations in recreation program planning in senior centers, and funding sources for senior centers.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, the reader will be able to

• cite statistics on the growth of senior centers and clubs in the U.S.,
• identify the appropriate target population for senior centers,
• identify appropriate programs to be offered at senior centers,
• identify program goals for senior centers,
• describe the senior center facility (setting), and
• identify the steps involved in program planning in senior centers.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The National Institute of Senior Centers (NCOA, 2002) defines a senior center as a place where “older adults come together for services and activities that reflect their experiences 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 community.” Senior centers are a
Senior Centers and Clubs

relatively new concept in the United States, with the greatest growth occurring after 1965. The first senior club was established in Boston in 1870, and more than 70 years later the first senior center was established in New York City in 1943. Since that time there has been a tremendous growth in the number of senior centers; in 1966, there were 340 senior centers; by 1970, there were 1,200 senior centers; by 1978, approximately 6,000 centers were in operation (Gelfand, 1984); and by 2002, there were approximately 15,000 centers in operation serving 10 million elders (NCOA, 2002).

A distinction needs to be made between senior centers and senior clubs. A senior center operates in a permanent facility and provides a central location for services, whereas a senior club may have no regular meeting place (Ralston, 1983). A senior center is usually more available to elders than clubs and may be open three or more days per week, whereas a senior club may be open only one day per week or less, but depending on the individual club, it may stay open five days per week. The personnel working in a senior center and club usually differ: Senior centers commonly employ a full-time administrator, full- and part-time activity leaders, volunteers, and a secretary. On the other hand, many senior clubs have no paid staff. In addition, senior centers have diverse funding sources and implement a variety of activities. Senior clubs typically are supported by dues and contributions, and programming usually emphasizes social and recreational activities. In general, senior centers are more concerned with serving as a bridge to the community and as a focal point for common interests and concerns than are senior clubs (Gelfand, 1984).

Senior centers are the primary concern of the next section; their goals and objectives are described in detail.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Senior centers offer a variety of services for older adults. They are designated as community focal points through the Older Americans Act (NCOA, 2002). According to the National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC, 1988), a multipurpose senior center is “a community facility where older people can meet with one another to fulfill many of their social, physical, emotional, and intellectual needs.” Center programs enhance elders’ dignity, independence, and involvement in the community. Activities and services offered through multipurpose senior centers include (Administration on Aging, 2003)

- recreation;
- health promotion (including wellness and fitness activities);
- meals;
- education;
- arts programs;
- leisure travel;
• transportation;
• center volunteering;
• community volunteering;
• employment assistance;
• financial assistance;
• information, referral, and counseling;
• Internet training;
• social or community action;
• intergenerational programs; and
• community outreach.

Clearly, most of the services offered at senior centers are leisure related. A major goal of programs at senior centers is to provide meaningful leisure experiences that can enhance the well-being of older adults in the community.

Generally, senior centers provide an informal support system (Ralston, 1983) and should try to meet the needs of the older adults in the community it serves. In addition, senior centers serve as a resource for information on community affairs and senior citizens’ services as well as a training center. An important objective of a senior center is to encourage input from the elders it serves and maintain their support (Gelfand, 1984).

According to Gelfand (1984), another important objective is to provide activities that are relevant to the target population. The elders’ needs should be assessed and then programs should be planned according to their needs, interests, and abilities. Hawkins and McLean (1993) state that it is important for senior centers to offer a wide variety of services and programs, to meet the diverse needs of the older population. A challenge for senior centers in meeting the needs of baby boomers is indicated by research cited by MaloneBeach and Langeland (2010) in which 94% of survey respondents identified learning new things as being important, but less than 50% viewed senior centers as a place for learning.

Recreation is an important service offered by senior centers and contributes greatly to the effectiveness of senior centers in enhancing the well-being of attendees. Research (MaloneBeach & Langeland, 2010) indicates that senior center attendees have lower levels of loneliness, higher levels of life satisfaction, and a higher quality of life.

TARGET POPULATION

Krout (1993) estimates that between 10% and 20% of elders in the U.S. attend senior centers at least once a year. Approximately 10 million elders attend senior centers in the U.S. annually (NCOA, 2002). The characteristics of the attendees are changing. In the 1970s, surveys showed that senior center attendees were relatively young (between the ages of 60 and 74) and healthy,
but in the 21st century, it seems that the trend is toward serving an older and less healthy population. MaloneBeach and Langeland (2010) speculate that the baby boomers will start attending senior centers at a later age than previous generations. Approximately 60% of senior centers in the U.S. reported an increase in the number of frail older adults attending their centers, and 10% of attendees are over age 85 (NCOA, 2002). Stable characteristics of the population of senior center attendees are that the majority are women and white (NCOA, 2002). Many senior center attendees live alone, as reflected in statistics for the older population in general. Therefore a major function of senior center programs is to combat loneliness.

Recreation programs in senior centers will be influenced by trends in the population of senior center attendees. The statistics cited in the previous paragraph seem to indicate that more activities that address the needs of the more frail, older (85 and over) segment of the older population will be needed. Also, senior centers might need to modify their programming to reflect the needs and interests of baby boomers (e.g., rock and roll music at senior centers). But, will baby boomers choose to attend senior centers, or will senior centers continue to be increasingly attended by the 85-and-over segment of the older population? The characteristics of the attendees will largely determine the direction that recreation programs in senior centers take in the future. What do you think senior centers will be like 50 years from now (when a 20-year-old college student today will be 70 years old), compared to the senior centers of today? Exercise 2.1 addresses this question.

Looking at your answers to Exercise 2.1, how similar do you think senior centers 50 years from now will be to senior centers today? What changes do you predict? How did you feel about the recreational activities offered at the senior center you visited? How interested would you be in participating in activities like these when you are aged 70 or 80 or 90?

THE SETTING

A senior center should be located in an area in the community that is attractive and where elders feel comfortable. The area should be convenient and accessible to the target population. The facility itself should be accessible to people with disabilities, contain a variety of rooms of different sizes, and provide private areas for counseling (Gelfand, 1984).

Over 6,000 senior centers receive funding from the Older Americans Act. They can be run by a variety of organizations, such as (Administration on Aging, 2003)

- local nonprofit organizations,
- state and local governments,
- national charitable organizations,
- voluntary and religious organizations,
Exercise 2.1

*Senior Centers Today Versus 50 Years from Now*

**Instructions:**

1. Visit a local senior center (it will also help you to complete Exercise 2.2).
2. Take notes on the characteristics listed below and write your answers in the first column.
3. Project 50 years into the future and comment on the same characteristics, writing your answers in the second column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Senior Center Visited</th>
<th>Senior Centers 50 Years from Now</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of attendees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health of attendees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of services and activities offered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of recreational activities/description (e.g. type of music, dance, etc. offered)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ideally, a large multipurpose senior center with an attendance of over 200 older adults should be spacious and provide a variety of rooms. According to Murrin and Bilezikjian (1975), a large multipurpose senior center should be based on the following model:

### Spaces offered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spaces offered</th>
<th>Square Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommended</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Outdoor space: parking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lot, patio, game courts, landscaped areas, pickup and drop off zone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Indoor Space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Administration area/office space</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Conference space</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Classroom and crafts room</td>
<td>650 &amp; 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Arts and crafts room</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Library, quiet lounge</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Game room, noisy lounge</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Kitchen</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Restrooms</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Coatroom</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Janitor/Custodian space</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Storage</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Large assembly room</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. Circulation space</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total square footage</td>
<td>10,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The large assembly room should be the focal point of the facility. This can be established by allowing the assembly room to be in the middle of the center with all adjoining rooms leading to the assembly room forming a circle around it. As a general guideline, there should be 30 square feet of space per person (Murrin & Bilezikjian, 1975).

Some senior centers own their building; some meet in a church; others meet in a recreation center, a local government facility, a community center of a voluntary organization, or a housing authority building. Other possible locations for programs are libraries, universities, and apartment house recreation rooms.

Exercise 2.2 asks you to compare the guidelines for senior center facilities to the characteristics of the senior center facility that you visited for Exercise 2.1.
Exercise 2.2

Senior Center Facility Characteristics

Instructions:
1. Take notes on characteristics of the senior center facility that you visited for Exercise 2.1. Bring with you to the visit a list of the facility recommendations/guidelines from this chapter and try to make rough estimates of how the facility compares to these guidelines.
2. Write your answers in the appropriate spaces below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility Characteristics</th>
<th>Facility Characteristics of the Senior Center Visited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts room/Classroom:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Crafts room:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library/quiet lounge:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game room/Noisy lounge:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrooms:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coatroom:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large assembly room:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation space:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking back at your answers to Exercise 2.2, how adequate do you feel that the senior facility you visited is? How would you improve the facility? More specifically, what facilities would you add in order to enhance the provision of recreational activities?

RECREATION PROGRAM PLANNING IN SENIOR CENTERS

Senior centers offer a wide range of challenging and diverse activities to accommodate the needs of the older adults they serve. Senior centers attendees are higher functioning than the older adults that attend senior day care centers or reside in assisted living facilities or nursing homes. One way to take this factor into account is to include senior center attendees in the program planning process.

Exercise 2.3 is presented in order to help gain insight into recreation program planning in senior centers. This exercise asks you to first contemplate how your present recreational needs and interests would be most effectively met by a recreation center.

Compare your answers in the two columns. What are the similarities and differences? How similar are the two columns? What are the reasons for the differences that appear? Based on the results of this exercise, what have you learned about recreation program planning for senior centers of today and in the future?

Presently, a consideration in recreation program planning in senior centers is the high elder to staff ratio. Activities with a very high attendance (e.g., 50 to 100 attendees) can occur with only one or two staff members available to oversee the activity. Because of the great number of participants for every staff member, the type of recreational services provided tends to be more diversionary or educational in nature, as opposed to programming in senior day care centers, where therapeutic activities are more appropriate. Thus, in senior centers, recreational programming often does not include individual goal setting and charting of progress, as opposed to therapeutic recreation services in senior day care centers.

According to Gelfand (1984), programming should be under the direction and support of the elders it serves. In this way, senior center attendees have direct input into programming activities related to their specific interests, abilities, and needs.

Recreational activities that incorporate work or productivity (e.g., produce handmade crafts for sale) can be a positive feature of a recreation program in a senior center. The provision of work-like roles in a senior center program can be especially beneficial for men who have a strong work ethic. The idea of going to a center to engage in leisure activities might be repulsive to such men. However, these men might be attracted to attending a senior center if work-like experiences were offered that made them feel productive. The work experience
Exercise 2.3

My Ideal Recreation Center/Senior Center

Instructions:
1. In the recreation center column, describe, for each characteristic, what would best suit your present needs and interests. Let your imagination go, be idealistic. Under attendees, describe them in terms of demographics such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, etc.
2. Now, imagine yourself at age 80. In the senior center column, describe, for each characteristic, what you imagine would best suit your needs and interests at age 80.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Recreation Center</th>
<th>Senior Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Activities offered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Classes offered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trips, other programs offered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Attendees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
can help to make leisure time purposeful, create a sales outlet for crafts, yet still preserve the retirement lifestyle (Schreter & Hudson, 1981).

The National Council on Aging (NCOA, 1975) developed a philosophy of the senior center movement that is still relevant in the 21st century as a philosophical basis for program planning:

1. Aging should be viewed as a normal developmental process.
2. People need peers for interaction, encouragement, and support.
3. Adults have the right to have input in matters affecting them.
4. Elders have ambitions, capabilities, and creative capacities.
5. Elders have basic needs.
6. Elders are capable of continued growth and development.
7. Elders need access to information to solve problems.
8. Elders need a climate of trust and support.

If the philosophical principles listed above are incorporated into the program planning process, recreational activities and services will enhance attendees’ morale.

According to the National Council on Aging (NCOA, 1975), program planning should follow the following steps:

1. Assess individual needs.
2. Identify criteria and indicators of need fulfillment.
3. Identify barriers to need fulfillment.
4. State objectives and action steps to attain these needs.
5. Monitor and assess the objectives.
6. Examine the impact, measure the data, and evaluate the program.

Recreation programs and senior centers should cover a very wide range of activities since the high functioning population usually attending senior centers allows limitless possibilities. New technology is creating new activity possibilities. Examples of some innovative senior center programs are described by Mattimore (1993) below.

**Teleconferencing Program for Homebound Elders**

Called the “party line,” teleconference equipment is installed at the center, enabling up to nine people to converse with one another and the party line operator. The operator welcomes everyone, gives all a chance to talk. The neediest, loneliest elders can be reached by this service.

**Computer Classes**

There is an international computer network for elders called Senior Net, which links elders via computer across the U.S.
Interactive Television Programs

The cable station has a phone number on the screen; by dialing the number, a menu will appear on the screen, and then press numbers as instructed on the phone for further information.

Sincerely attempting to understand elders’ needs, and allowing senior center attendees the opportunity to have input in program planning will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the recreation program.

SUMMARY

In summary, senior centers serve as a community focal point; a resource center for information and health services; and a center for recreational, social, and educational activities. More senior centers are needed today and even more will be needed in the future to meet the needs of an expanding older population.

REFERENCES