



## Key Characteristics of Exemplary Older Adult Programs

The population of Philadelphia is aging: by 2015, the population that is 85 and over is expected to grow by 10%, with an additional 25% growth by 2025.<sup>1</sup> Historically, faith-based organizations have served as natural social and community hubs for older adults. Understanding best practices for programs for older adults is important to meeting the needs of a growing group of Philadelphia residents.

PHMC Research and Evaluation staff interviewed two experts in aging services from Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS) and Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA) about their views on the qualities of successful older adult programs, as well as specific considerations for congregations that host or provide older adult programs. Both have a wealth of experience in delivering quality senior services to older adults living in the greater Metropolitan Philadelphia area. The two experts also worked specifically in and with faith-based organizations and were knowledgeable about the history, advantages, and barriers for congregations to provide aging services.

### Key Characteristics

**Leadership:** A senior services program must have dedicated leadership with a clear vision of what older adult service programs they want to offer. Since older adult programs can range from offering health services to home repair, transportation, socialization activities, travel, meals, and many other services, it is important for strong leaders to keep the program focused on the needs of the community's older adults. The director of the program is extremely important, because not only must this person have knowledge about the needs of older adults, but s/he must also be aware of the business aspects of managing a senior program. Many older adult programs offer too many services to be sustainable for the community that they serve; it is important to understand which services bring in money to be able to cover those programs which lose money.

In addition to strong organizational leadership, having a strong and diverse advisory board is vital to having a successful program. A diverse board can inform the organization of current needs of older adults in the community, larger political trends in social services, funding opportunities, new ways of delivering older adult services, best practices in older adult services, and other topics.

**Holistic approach to services:** Senior service programs serve an entire population of individuals (older adults) as opposed to a narrower age or demographic group, so they cannot focus on only one particular need or service. "Older adults" includes a range of individuals, from those who are able to live independently to those who are frail and need assistance with daily activities. Three general areas of need for older adults include health

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<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (2006). Looking Ahead: Philadelphia's Aging Population in 2015. <http://www.pcacares.org/Files/633124211244069135.pdf>



care, social services, and financial supports. Social services include housing services, home repair, case management, shopping trips, travel, and food assistance. Specific services that are common for most senior centers include transportation and socialization activities.

More recently, congregations have been seeing increased need for housing services, as older adults are moving out of larger homes into smaller residences to save money or because they are unable to live independently in their original homes. However, affordable housing is scarce and waiting lists are long, so congregations are looking to partner with other organizations to learn about housing resources.

Other services that congregations are well-suited to provide, but need more guidance about include end-of-life care and pain management issues. Faith leaders are interested in learning more about these topics and how faith can assist in a person's end-of-life decision making processes. It is a natural fit for congregations to assist in these issues, as they are often central to a person's spiritual beliefs.

**Space:** Depending on the services offered by a senior services program, the space needed for the services will be different. If exercise is part of the program, a gym may be necessary for the program to successfully operate. For a program that hosts education seminars, having comfortable seating, wide aisles, and handicapped accessible rooms is important. Similarly, with a meal program, older adults should be able to get around comfortably and socialize in a welcoming environment.

Older congregation buildings in Philadelphia may not be well-suited to host programs for older adults, since many cannot accommodate the mobility needs of some older adults with physical or cognitive limitations. Senior-friendly buildings should have ramps, elevators, chair lifts, wide aisles, railings, and other accommodations to make it easier for older adults to move around the building, especially if activities take place on different floors within one building. However, it is costly and many congregations cannot afford to make those renovations. Creating senior-friendly buildings is essential to conducting successful older adult programs in congregations.

**Community Relationships:** Older adult programs must be responsive to the changing needs of older adults who live in the community that they serve. Without relevant services, older adults will not attend the program. Maintaining trusting relationships with community members is extremely important to developing buy-in from the community, as programs with more investment from the community are more successful. Having leaders and staff that reflect the demographic characteristics of the community is important to show the community that the organization is mindful of the community makeup.

Many congregations have naturally established community relationships with the older adult community, since many older adults have invested their entire lives to their particular house of worship. Many older adults consider their house of worship to be their



one key source of trusted information, their “power base” or “safe haven.” Congregations are a natural community center for older adults, as many congregations themselves are aging. To respond to these needs of their own members, congregations have been motivated to provide different kinds of aging services.

However, there are potential barriers that occur when congregations offer their services to the larger community beyond their congregations. Older adults who do not belong to the congregation may feel excluded or unwelcome if the program seems to be overly faith-based; for example, an older adult who is not Jewish may feel uncomfortable about going to a Jewish senior center with Hebrew as part of its name. This may not be the case with all older adults in the community, but if organizations want to attract all community members to come to a program, they may want to investigate whether or not older adults prefer to attend a program with a neutral name at a neutral space that is not affiliated with a faith.

***Partnerships:*** All community-based organizations, faith-based or secular, are limited by their budgets, resources, and expertise, so building partnerships with other community resources is vital to providing a comprehensive network of services for older adults in the community. Organizations cannot sustainably and efficiently provide all services to all types of older adults, so they should be aware of other resources and refer clients to other partners. In addition to services, organizations may be able to find free or discounted travel or arts tickets for groups of people, which is usually very popular with older adults looking for socializing opportunities.

Partnering with transportation services is also crucial to ensuring success of a senior program, whether or not the older adults are able to live independently. Establishing a reliable system of getting older adults to the site can make a huge difference in whether or not people come to the program. Many programs partner with Paratransit or manage their own van shuttle service.