

**IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT LINKAGES BETWEEN SUCCESSFUL AGING AND
SENIOR CENTER PARTICIPATION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Multipurpose senior centers have been identified as preferred, focal points for comprehensive and coordinated service delivery to elderly people. The National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) estimates that on an annual basis ten million older adults are provided services by more than 12,000 senior centers nation wide (Beisgen & Kritchman, 2003). Given the number and importance of senior centers in the service delivery network, it is imperative to assess the relationship between programming and successful aging among program participants. Important goals identified by senior centers include: (1) to provide educational programming, health promotional activities, and social skills development enabling older persons to maintain an adequate functioning independent lifestyle, and (2) to provide a social environment conducive to the development of a social support system thereby reducing loneliness and depression, and enhancing life satisfaction.

To assess program impact, NISC (senior center) delegates representing California, Florida, Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, Texas, and Tennessee volunteered to participate in the research. A total of 734 useable surveys were received from senior centers representing these states with participants ranging in age from 55 to 93 (mean = 75). Participants reported coming to their respective senior center on the average of 8.3 years. The research instrument contained a variety of outcome-based research questions including sections on (1) senior center utilization; (2) social support linkages/friendships, (3) emotional well-being and depression scale, (4) healthy behavior indicators and (5) selected demographic variables.

Statistical findings shown in the attached Tables 1-8 provides a demographic profile of senior center users as well as statistical data that clearly demonstrates senior centers in the 21st Century provide a social support milieu, which promotes successful aging among its participants. Not only do the vast majority of senior center users report that senior center programming has improved their mental and physical health, over 75% indicate that the center has helped them to remain independent. It appears that senior centers are also doing a good job in helping older adults maintain their overall physical health. Over 90% of the respondents reported their health to be better or about the same when compared to a year earlier.

In addition, over 90% indicate they have developed close friendships since coming to the senior center. A high degree of social support is further evident by the degree of personal assistance provided. Over 50% rely on friends at the senior center for assistance and over 80% indicate they provide such assistance to their friends at the center. In addition, 86.9% of the respondents indicated that senior center friends provide them with emotional security. Some 75% indicate that they engage in a variety of friendship activities outside of the center. Table 6 provides a summary of those activities. Additional statistical findings from bivariate correlations is the strong association between practicing health behavior and the health promotion programs attended ($r = .54$; $p < .01$). It also appears that as participants make positive behavior changes in their lifestyles they enjoy a more positive outlook on life (emotional well-being) and take comfort in assuming self-care initiatives ($r = .44$; $p < .01$). There was also a positive relationship between degree of social support and engaging in healthy behaviors ($r = .32$; $p < .01$). A series of Stepwise Regression Models (Table 8) serve as excellent predictors for mental outlook, social support, healthy behavior, and depression.

Research findings presented here support the notion that senior centers provide an important focal point in the lives of seniors. Comprehensive programming at the senior centers in this sample reinforced the major components of successful aging. Since the majority of

respondents currently live alone, the Center provides the opportunity to make friends, learn new skills, and knowledge, and improve participants' overall quality of life. Center programming was also highly successful in improving the overall health functioning of elderly participants. Specific positive behavioral changes were recorded which, in turn, enhances elderly independence.

As the graying of America continues, changes in attitudes and policies toward aging will be necessary. Inherent in the aging of America is the absolute need for people to grow old with the highest levels of health, vitality and independence. For this to occur, the concept of health and well-being as it relates to the older segment of the population must include the ability to function effectively in society, to exercise self-reliance, and to achieve a high quality of life. Social policy related to the delivery of health care can no longer be construed in the traditional manner of medical care or illness management. Senior centers are excellent sites for community-based health promotion activities as well as a relaxed place to make new friends and strengthen social networks and prevent premature institutionalization.

References:

Beisgen, B. A., & Kraitchman, M. C. (2003). *Senior Centers: Opportunities for successful aging*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.