



center for
Healthy Aging
model health programs for communities

Recruiting Older Adults Into Your Physical Activity Programs

NCOA
NATIONAL COUNCIL
ON AGING

“Increasing physical activity is a formidable public health challenge that we must hasten to meet. The stakes are high, and the potential rewards are momentous: preventing premature death, unnecessary illness, and disability; controlling health care costs; and maintaining a high quality of life into old age.”

*David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.
US Surgeon General 1997–2002*

Introduction

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), being physically active is one of the most important ways older adults can maintain their health and quality of life (2005). Federal recommendations for all adults call for at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on five or more days of the week. Yet, the CDC reports that more than 60% of older adults are inactive. The reasons for inactivity are as diverse as the older adult population (Coffman, 2004). Some older adults have grown up with messages that physical activity is not “ladylike” or is unnecessary or unappealing “after a hard day’s work.” Others may be reluctant or completely resistant to participate in programs because they:

- don’t like the idea of “exercise” and don’t expect it will do any good
- worry about potential injury or pain
- don’t know where to look for programs
- don’t want to be “tied down” to a weekly program
- don’t like the program location
- don’t feel comfortable in new situations or with a group of strangers
- don’t feel program leaders care about them
- have caregiving responsibilities or other competing obligations
- have practical problems like transportation and program costs
- don’t have friends or family members who participate in physical activity

For an additional discussion of cultural and gender barriers to participation, refer to *Motivating Participants to Be More Physically Active* (www.healthyagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=92&ElementID=305).

Aging services and health care providers are faced with the challenge of overcoming these beliefs and concerns by creating appealing and appropriate physical activity programs that attract older adults. This issue brief is the sixth in a series about promoting best practices in physical activity programming. Its purpose is to provide strategies and tips based, in part, on *social marketing principles* that can guide *recruitment* of older adult participants into high quality physical activity programs. The strategies described will be most effective when the physical activity program incorporates evidence-based and best practice components. Earlier issue briefs offered suggestions and guidance on developing and operating high quality programs.

Other specific strategies for retention and recovery will be addressed in a later issue brief in this series.

Recruitment refers to the process of using community partnerships and referral strategies, tailored outreach approaches, and one-on-one communication techniques to identify, engage, and enroll a target group of older adults. Two interrelated activities are *retention*—focusing on motivating older adults to maintain their participation, and *recovery*—countering attrition by overcoming obstacles and restoring interest in program participation. A well-planned recruitment approach incorporates retention and recovery activities. For example, when recruiting older adults, a helpful retention strategy is to let the older adults know that occasional absences may be necessary and that temporary absenteeism will not result in being dropped from the program or being viewed as a failure. Ongoing efforts to retain and recover are an important indication of the program’s commitment to work with clients through life’s ups and downs. Enlisting the support of the enrollee’s family and friends early on is a great recruitment, retention, and recovery strategy that may help engage, or re-engage the individual, especially those who attend the program irregularly or drop out.

This issue brief focuses on providing a social marketing framework for designing a recruitment plan, successful recruitment tips from aging services providers who conduct physical activity programs for older adults, and one-on-one recruitment communication techniques.

Social Marketing Principles and Recruitment Planning

Adopted from the business sector, the “*six p’s of social marketing principles*” form a comprehensive framework that can be readily applied to planning recruitment for physical activity programs for older adults. The framework of the six p’s includes the following tasks and questions (Nichols et al., 2004):

1. Participants

- **TASK:** Define and identify the needs of the audience of potential participants who are the target for the physical activity program.
- **ASK:** What are their needs, beliefs, concerns, and expectations? What are their perceptions about the benefits of physical activity and healthy lifestyles? What challenges do they face in coming to programs and making physical activity a regular part of their lives?

2. Product

- **TASK:** Select physical activity programs that are relevant and attractive.
- **ASK:** What makes the program a “good fit” for this targeted audience? How does it meet their needs, beliefs, and perceptions of physical activity? How does this program compare to other physical activity programs in the community—what is its unique appeal?

3. Price

- **TASK:** Consider not only the monetary but intangible costs to participants in the short and long run, like the time and effort expended to overcome competing demands. Define the benefits of the program that outweigh these costs.
- **ASK:** What is the cost to the older adult in terms of money, time, effort, and physical and emotional input? What will he or she perceive as tangible and meaningful benefits to participation? What are the direct and indirect benefits of the program? How can these benefits be maximized to offset costs? Can certain costs like activity fees be reduced or waived for some participants?

4. Place

- **TASK:** Consider that accessibility to place includes location, convenience, and social and cultural acceptability. Identify accessible and attractive program locations or improve existing sites to enhance recruitment.
- **ASK:** What sites will be convenient, welcoming, comfortable, and acceptable for the targeted group? Will the participants find the location sufficiently pleasant to want to return frequently and over time? Can transportation be arranged?

5. Promotion

- **TASK:** Organize a comprehensive plan for outreach and recruitment with a well-crafted “product message.” Consider a combination of promotional strategies including word of mouth, newspapers, agency newsletters and circulars, media campaigns and advertising, referrals by case managers and health care providers, community presentations, health fairs, and Web sites.
- **ASK:** What is the focused message that captures the value and appeal of the program for older participants? Where and in what ways does the target group of older adults seek information? Who within and outside the agency can help support and convey the product message?

6. Partnership

- **TASK:** Build collaboration with community partners, whether formal or informal, to enhance the reach and impact of the program. Seek partners who can serve as links to the target audience, provide an acceptable location, extend promotion and outreach, help tailor interventions to be appealing to a specific older adult audience, make referrals to the program, and provide ongoing support of active lifestyles.
- **ASK:** What organizations or providers does our agency currently work with, and what organizations or providers do we want to work with, in order to promote physical activity to our target group? What does our agency and our physical activity program have to offer our partners? What do our partners have to offer this program? What is the focused message that captures the value and appeal of the program for our partners?

These *six p*'s can guide the development of a comprehensive social marketing plan for effective recruitment. Taking the time to conduct each task and answer each question will, over the long run, help to reduce or eliminate the waste of time, energy, and limited resources on failed outreach, unmet recruitment goals, waning participant motivation, and high program attrition rates.

Social Marketing Tips from Providers

Ten aging organizations that conduct best practice physical activity programs for older adults have shared their successful recruitment strategies with NCOA. (The complete list of these agencies can be found in the acknowledgments section.) Their tips illustrate the *six p*'s of social marketing.

With respect to stimulating *participation* in physical activity programs, some successful approaches include:

- conducting social events and introductory physical activity events in senior centers to attract potential participants
- offering free trials of classes
- providing one on one contact and monitoring
- offering group programming customized with individual-level modifications
- offering a range of classes for different levels of functional ability
- offering attractive incentives to join

To make the physical activity program *product* a good fit, effective approaches include:

- seeking consumer input for program development to enhance its cultural appropriateness
- translating programs into the participants' native language
- encouraging or rewarding participants to recruit friends and family members to join them
- recruiting personal trainers or group exercise instructors who reflect the cultural diversity of the participants
- rewarding participants for continued participation
- customizing programs for different levels of ability and function

To address *price*, successful methods for addressing participants' costs include:

- offering programs for free
- giving scholarships
- reducing fees on a sliding scale
- seeking voluntary donations from participants
- seeking support for scholarships from partnering agencies or associations

To address accessibility of *place*, agencies report:

- providing their classes in multiple locations
- offering transportation
- bringing classes to sites where seniors normally congregate or live, such as churches, adult day programs, congregate meal sites, ethnic community centers, and low-income housing developments

Effective *promotion* efforts include:

- engaging culturally diverse elders to serve on the program's advisory board
- posting calendars of activities within ethnic shopping markets and minority community centers
- holding cultural events at centers to attract minority participants
- advertising in Spanish language, African-American or inner-city papers or church bulletins
- marketing through Parish Nurse Programs

Several agencies built creative informal and formal *partnerships* by:

- encouraging caregivers to attend classes
- recruiting participants through partnerships with a variety of entities such as community social services, cultural centers, agencies for the homebound, hospitals, the local housing authority, and the local health alliance

Communication Techniques for Successful "One-on-One" Recruitment

Along with a comprehensive marketing plan, that lays the foundation for successful recruitment for physical activity programs, another essential component is one-on-one staff communications with older adults that address beliefs and expectations, gauge readiness for participation, and help to motivate older adults to set goals for a healthy lifestyle. When recruiting, staff should communicate caring, and support an interest in learning what older adults think about physical activity. It is important to determine up front what individuals believe about the benefits and detriments of physical activity, what current and past successes they have had in being physically active, and what expectations they have for their health in the coming years.

To engage an older adult in a recruitment interview, it is important to ask permission, "Would you like to hear about this physical activity program and how it might benefit your health and functioning?" Ask what he or she knows about the program and use a participant-centered approach to create a partnership in decision-making about readiness to become involved. Rather than pressing for enrollment, ask open-ended questions like, "Can I answer any questions or concerns you have about participating in physical activities in general, or specifically about this program? Do you think this program can help you? What challenges do you think you will face when joining this program, or becoming active in general? Would you like to try the program?"

To underscore benefits, answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” Also, discuss what is expected regarding commitment and participation. If possible, arrange an opportunity for the older adult to “try out” part of the physical activity program to ease discomfort about what is required, to allow him or her to see who else is participating, and to reinforce the “I think I can do that” attitude. Indicate support by stating, “I will be here to help you address any challenges that come up, and to discuss your satisfaction and progress with the program.”

Other people can assist with recruitment, including program volunteers, current and former program participants, and community partners. Peer-to-peer communications can be a particularly compelling technique that appeals to potential recruits. Ask current or former program participants to share testimonials about the impact of the physical activity program on their health, quality of life, and sense of belonging. Also, as appropriate, try to involve the older adult’s family and support system. Tell them about the benefits of the program and ask them to provide reinforcing messages.

During the recruitment process, program providers can also communicate their support by proactively addressing the kinds of daily needs that may pose barriers to participation. For example, a provider can assist potential participants with such practical needs such as forming car pools or equipping the center with wheelchairs, canes, assistive devices, etc. to enhance accessibility. The provider can demonstrate understanding of the multiple caregiving roles of participants by helping to identify adult day care relief or maintaining a game closet, crayons, toys, and books that will help to entertain grandchildren who may attend programs with grandparents. Ultimately, positive staff attitudes and committing time to explore, understand, and address participants’ needs are essential in recruiting older adults into physical activity programs.

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Recommendations: Are there special recommendations for older adults?* www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations/older_adults.htm.
- Coffman, S. (2004). The five goals of programming. *Journal of Active Aging*, 3(Nov/Dec), 32-36.
- Nichols, L., et al. (2004). Social marketing as a framework for recruitment: Illustrations from the REACH study. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 16(5), 157S-176S.

Acknowledgments

NCOA would like to thank Mary Altpeter, PhD, of the UNC Institute on Aging, and N. Carole Milas, MS, of the University of Pittsburgh Center for Healthy Aging, for their work on this issue brief.

We also thank the following agencies for sharing their recruitment strategies: The Capital Senior Center, Chicago Department on Aging, City of Aurora Senior Services, Johnson City Seniors' City, Holy Cross Hospital, Hospital of St. Raphael, MU School of Health Professions, Madison School & Community Recreation, Senior Services of Seattle/King County, and Resources for Seniors, Inc. For more information on these best practice programs, please refer to our Best Practices in Physical Activity Programming Issue Brief #1 on the Web site www.healthyagingprograms.org.

National Council on Aging

300 D Street, SW Suite 801 | Washington, DC 20024

(202) 479-1200

www.ncoa.org

Center for Healthy Aging

www.healthyagingprograms.org