

Attracting the Boomers: Making the Shift to a New Age Community Center from a Senior Center

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Brief Description:

Senior Services Plus is submitting a project under the Adapting to Changing Demographics and Diversity category that outlines a best practice initiative our agency developed and initiated to address changing needs of seniors health.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

Since 2006, Senior Services Plus (SSP), has been asking its' management team tough questions to address the issue of how we can change from a traditional senior center to a more comprehensive community center that is pioneering programs and services that will address the changing needs of the community and population we serve. Some of these questions we have been asking have been:

- How can agencies that serve the senior population adapt to the influx of the Baby Boomer generation and their needs for services that promote health, socialization and tools for longevity?
- How will we engage this population in programs and services that will provide opportunities for well-being and interaction that is not only on the cutting edge for those seniors that are more technologically advanced but also remain sensitive and accessible to the more traditional senior or those with compromised health or social economic status?
- In what ways can our agency better position itself to receive funding from alternate revenue streams while continuing to build on current program funding?
- Are our current programs sustainable and how can we ensure future sustainability while federal and state funds continue to diminish or be reallocated?

The current statistics regarding the senior population are eye-opening and the implications are staggering. The new market of future seniors is the Baby Boomer Generation, who are a force that will change the way services are provided in our field. The demographics from the National Council on Aging are overwhelming:

- In 2008, 8,000 Boomers a day began turning 60.
- In 2011, 10,000 Boomers a day began turning 65.
- Between 2011 and 2030, there will be a 75% increase in the 65+ population as the boomers enter true retirement.
- 65+ Population = 69 million in 2030.
- Continued 14% annual growth 2030 to 2050.
- Today: 80,000 people over 100.
- Over 1,000,000 Boomers will live to be over 100; the majority of them women.
- Not only will over a million Boomers live to be 100, but expectations are that many will live to reach the “natural cap” of 120+ years old.

Within the near future, the Boomers will be the recipients of the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in the history of the world. Over 10 trillion dollars will be transferred to Boomers from their parents. This generation is also the most technologically advanced for their age group and will utilize internet technology to further their health and independence, connectedness, understanding of health issues and transactional independence in areas such as banking, purchasing, investing.

Before diving into how SSP has addressed and will address these changing demographics, I would like to give you some background information about our agency, Senior Services Plus. SSP was established in 1973 after three seniors realized the need for more senior programs in the Alton, Illinois area. Within the first 10 years of operation, SSP established several programs such as Transportation, Meals on Wheels, Congregate Dining Services, Community Care Program and the Foster Grandparent Program. For the past 39 years, SSP has remained the leader in services for seniors providing a diverse array of health and nutrition, education and recreational services in a five county Southwest Illinois region that is part of the St. Louis

Metropolitan area. In 2011, SSP has provided direct services for 31,051 individuals and participated in indirect services for 8,802 individuals. Of the total, 26,400 were aged 55 plus, 57 individuals with disabilities, 4,181 children through the Foster Grandparents, Nutrition and Transportation program, and 413 individuals age 16 to 55 through the Wellness Center.

SSP has spent the last 39 years providing services in our region that fulfill our mission to provide support to individuals as they age so that they can live independently with an enhanced quality of life. The past six years have presented the most challenging times for senior service providers across the country due to the influx of the Baby Boomer generation and their changing needs as well as surviving through the worst economic meltdown in 70 years.

The strategic goals that SSP focused on were to meet the changing needs of our customer base as they age by creating services that would attract the more active seniors or Baby Boomers into our agency through creative and innovative services and programs that promote healthy living, longevity and socialization. SSP also remained committed to provide services that met the needs of those seniors who are most at risk due to their social economic status. During this process the agency operated under tremendous pressure due to the national economic crisis and the subsequent delays in the State of Illinois payments. In spite of the pressure caused by delayed payments from the State of Illinois, SSP continued to operate without downsizing, and amazingly enough, has expanded while making the transition from a traditional senior center to a modern community center which not only attracts Baby Boomers or younger seniors, but the entire community as well. SSP did this by adopting an aggressive strategic plan in 2008 which focused on the following:

- Expand the CCP Homemaker or non-skilled in home care program because it is our biggest revenue generator and underwrites programs such as Transportation, Meals on Wheels, Information & Assistance, and Congregate Meal Programs that are loss leaders. We focused on expansion of the CCP program because there is no cap for CCP program and we can accept as many cases as we want. This was a risk as we based our agency expansion on this program because it is also our greatest area of exposure due to the delayed payments from the State of Illinois. At that point we were doing 5,000 hours per month, we currently are doing 19,000.
- Develop earned revenue programs independent of government funding that attract younger seniors.

- Launch an aggressive marketing program to promote SSP as the leader in senior services in our region. SSP, although suffering similar trying circumstances as other senior centers and not for profits, have been able to meet our challenges and are now known as one of the area's best kept secrets.

SSP utilized research from a study completed by NCOA on the top senior centers in the country to formulate our goals. In March 2007 a study was completed by SB&A and Brooks Adams Research on senior centers across the nation on "Trends in Senior Consumer Values". The research included surveys and questionnaires from over 500 senior centers across the country. This study identified the Baby Boomer as being the main consumer affecting national trends in Senior Consumer Behavior. The study indicated that, "Boomers want to do it their own way, in a manner consistent with their values, and they don't like to be told otherwise. Boomers never felt comfortable amid the stifling conformity of the Greatest Generation years. They grew up determined to create a more expressive culture ...a culture that would value individualism over traditionalism, spirituality over religiosity, free choice over blind loyalty, diversity over uniformity...As boomers see it, if tradition can't accommodate freedom, it's tradition that must change; just because something used to be a certain way doesn't mean it always has to be that way." The study also identified Boomers as being less impressed by catered services and wanting a greater demand for wellness orientation in order to live a longer life, with fewer health services utilized. This is a shift to preventative wellness practices in order to remain active longer. The study also indicated that 81% of the respondents wanted exercise equipment as their top request for senior center facilities and 66% chose fitness programming as their second request.

The needs of this population conflicted with traditional senior center services. Senior Centers across the country are facing two options in meeting the demands of the Baby Boomer aging population, either change direction or close their doors. The development of traditional "Senior Centers" began as a national initiative in the early 1970s when individuals who were retiring organized non-profits to provide a place for social clubs and support services for seniors in need. These Centers operated for 30 plus years and services were centered on the following traditional program cores:

1. Nutrition: Meals On Wheels/Congregate Group Dining Sites.
2. Transportation
3. Social Clubs: Cards, Woodcarvers, Bingo etc.

These groups and some program expansion served the senior Centers well for many years until changes started occurring in the early 2000s when those individuals who

started the centers started moving into residential supported living or dying. This changing trend caused senior centers to experience a down turn due to a lack of participation. SSP, like many other organizations, spent considerable time in identifying program trends that met the varied interests of the upcoming Baby Boomer generation, while continuing to provide services and programming that would meet the needs of seniors who currently attend centers and have more traditional interests.

In 2008 SSP implemented best practices which addressed senior health through the development of affordable low cost wellness services. SSP developed our Wellness Center based on the following mission statement “All individuals should have access to affordable fitness services as they age”. Following that simple idea, the SSP management staff started several initiatives that made a major impact on senior’s health in our community while attracting the more active senior or Baby Boomer crowd. The SSP Management Team also identified two important strategies we would have to embrace in order to achieve our goals:

- Expand services through partnerships with our funding entities and other civic, and community organizations.
- Initiate changes within our agency that will challenge our staff in the manner in which we perform our jobs and the individuals we support.

SSP focus on implementing these strategies by partnering with the YMCA and in 2008, we received a generous donation of 17 pieces of cardio and weight equipment to start a Wellness Program. The second step was using strategic planning with the staff to analyze our existing space usage and then make changes accordingly to implement the opening of the Wellness Center. The total square footage of the facility is 21,000, of which roughly 17,000 is usable office and program space. Of the total usable space, 60% is dedicated to offices for administrative and direct services and occupied between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Of the remaining 40%, 23% are the Café/Dining area restrooms and storage. The remaining 17% of the facility, the northeast complex, houses the programs and activities for our customers outside of dining. This includes card groups, wellness activities, quilters and educational classes. In 2006 the usage of the facility was based on open hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and by 1p.m., (except on Thursdays) the facility was fairly empty after lunch ended. The only area that remained fairly active was the I & A offices which scheduled appointments or had walk-ins during open hours. The northeast complex which was used exclusively for Programs and Activities was scheduled as follows:

- The multipurpose Room was set aside for Board Meetings once per month and used for some educational classes such as “55 Alive or Rules of the Road”.
- The space used for card groups, (where the wellness room is now) was used twice weekly for four hour time periods.
- The second wellness room was used once per week for a four hour period for the woodcarvers. The quilter’s room was used six hours a day twice weekly.

In October 2006, the north east complex which is 3,150 square feet was available for 40 hours weekly for programs and activities. This area was only scheduled for 14% of open hours for programs and activities only. In October 2008, the same area was transformed to offer Wellness Center for individuals aged 16+ to include the following:

- Fully equipped wellness center with 12 pieces of cardio equipment and 14 weight resistance stations.
- Eight different fitness classes offered during 17 times through the week.

In 2012 the same area is utilized on a 75 hour per week basis as we have expanded facility operating hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. to 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, Saturday 8 a.m. to 3p.m. and Sunday 10 a.m. to 2p.m. The same space is now used 41% of the time for programs and activities and we have two rooms for weight and cardio equipment and a separate class room which has 14 classes offered 32 times a week. In a four year period SSP has expanded our membership from 243 members to 855 members and initiated a low cost personnel training program called Get Fit personnel training. For \$50 a month an individual can get 8, 30 minutes personnel training sessions, nutrition counseling and attend free support groups for weight loss.

With the addition of the Wellness Center in 2008 we developed a Café Grill based on the Mather Lifeway Café model in Chicago that offers breakfast and lunch from 7a.m. to 1p.m. and a low cost salad bar in addition to our congregate meal program. The School House Grill is open to the public and in March 2012, we developed the Get Fit Healthy Choice Meal Program which is a three to seven day healthy meal service open to the public. The meals are packaged fresh and individuals can order Breakfast, lunch and dinner of healthy portioned meals for weight loss and healthy eating goals. Both these programs continue to grow and the revenue supports the Meals On Wheels program. These best practices have addresses senior health attracted a population of younger more active seniors who would have never attended our senior center before and put us

on the path to become a community center which is the direction we want to go to attract all individuals as they age. The SSP Wellness Center and School House Cafe has reinforced our position as a leader in the senior field in not only our region, the St. Louis Metro area and the State of Illinois.

Senior Services Plus continues to meet weekly with its' management team to address current trends and needs within our community so that we can be one step ahead and anticipate the ever-changing needs of our community with innovative programs and services.

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