

Executive Summary

Evaluation of Senior Community Centers in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania

By:

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This research examined senior community centers in Pennsylvania to analyze challenges and opportunities that these centers face in providing services to a growing senior population. Specifically, the research: created an inventory of Pennsylvania's rural and urban senior community center (SCC) locations, including the types of services provided and activities available; analyzed SCC attendance and program participation, accessibility/access issues, means of transportation to/from the center, and relevant demographic characteristics; identified innovative and successful models that SCCs are using to provide services to older adults in rural and urban Pennsylvania, including those focusing on transportation, nutrition, social activities, and other issues; and formulated policy considerations regarding the development, growth, and maintenance of SCCs in Pennsylvania.

The research results indicate that 122,181 individuals age 55 years and older, or 3 percent of the projected over-55 population in Pennsylvania, participated in SCC programming in 2017. Participants accessed a wide variety of programs, including congregate meals, health

and wellness programs, which are focused on maximizing mobility and physical well-being, group and recreational programs, which are often suggested by the participants at each center, and, at a few centers, personal care services. In general, participants are independent and active individuals who go to SCCs for the activities they like. Participants are savvy consumers who make their wishes known about the need for new and engaging programs, and who are highly engaged in center leadership and volunteer roles.

To assess the strengths and weaknesses of current SCCs, the researchers surveyed SCCs and also conducted five focus groups. Additionally, SCC participants who completed the online survey were also asked to identify innovative programming within their centers, which helped to produce consistent results across centers regardless of their urban or rural location.

The research found that innovative programming occurs regardless of the center's location, size, or participant characteristics. Innovation was noted when centers thought outside of the physical facility, or a "center-without-walls"

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and sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities.

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approach, and were responsive to the needs and wants of their constituents. There is no one model, or one-size-fits-all description, of innovation.

Lack of flexibility was identified as the biggest impediment to SCC operations and growth. The areas most impacted by inflexibility were SCC funding, transportation, meals, staffing, and Pennsylvania Department of Aging reporting requirements.

The research found that centers lack the ability to share program ideas and find information across centers, whether regionally or across the state. By assisting centers in this area, the state will not only encourage and support innovation in SCC programming, but also provide a vehicle for consistent sharing of information that is currently lacking.

Finally, the research also identified important policy considerations for the Pennsylvania Department of Aging that could help enhance and further support SCCs. These include improved transportation service provision, revitalization of congregate meal offerings, funding, program flexibility, staffing, the sharing of information across programs on a regional and state level, and a centralized marketing initiative to promote senior community centers across the state.

For a copy of the full report, *Evaluation of Senior Community Centers in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania*, visit the Center's website at www.rural.palegislature.us.

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