

# A New Act for Senior Centers

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## Innovators Develop New Models to Serve Today's Older Adults

By Arlene Karidis

A senior center as a tourist attraction? It may sound far-fetched, but the Donelson Center of Senior Citizens in Nashville, TN, has earned just such a designation for its intergenerational, community-based dinner theater program.

Called *Senior Center for the Arts: Music, Dance, Theatre, and Art—After School, After Work, or After 50*, the program has participants aged six to 80+, and it's become quite a hit in the area. The *Nashville Business Journal* even ranked it one of the top 25 tourist attractions in middle Tennessee.

"The theater program has been an excellent opportunity for older adults to showcase their abilities and socialize with the youth," said Janet Jernigan, executive director of

Senior Citizens, Inc. "And from what we are seeing and hearing from the kids, it has been a valuable experience for them, too."

Seniors are involved in the entire production—from designing the set to taking on acting roles—right alongside the children who participate in an annual two-week summer intergenerational theater camp. Some of the shows even go on the road, starting at Donelson and moving on to other community venues.

Around the nation, centers like Donelson are putting a new spin on the traditional senior center. In the process, they're successfully attracting new participants, as well as new funding sources.

"The aging of the baby boomer generation is spurring many centers to rethink how they operate," said Barbara Eden-Molinario, a consultant to NCOA in senior center program development.

Gone is the stereotypical center with rectangular tables aligned in rows, stark walls, and "old folks" playing bingo. Many centers—new and old—are adding fitness wings and computer labs, atriums with sunlight

*Above: Seniors designed the entire stage set for the 2007 play The Foreigner at the Donelson Center of Senior Citizens in Nashville, TN, which has been named a tourist attraction for its ongoing productions. The Foreigner cast included Richard Moll, who played the role of Bull on the TV sitcom Night Court.*



*Evening games at the Shuffleboard Club and Coliseum at the Sunshine Center in St. Petersburg, FL, bring participants and community members of all ages to the center's downtown park campus.*



*Each spring, seniors at the Bartholomew County Senior Center in Columbus, IN, stuff Easter eggs for a community egg hunt. The once-a-year volunteer project appeals to seniors with busy lives, says Director Bob Pitman.*

streaming in, and lounges with high-definition, flat-screen televisions. Even administrators under tight budget constraints are finding creative ways to “dress up” their buildings and develop innovative programs and services—from as simple as putting round tables in the dining room to encourage socializing to starting up an intergenerational, 30-piece band.

### **New Seniors, New Programs**

“The true and most important measure of success is the ability to attract new participants, particularly younger seniors and baby boomers,” said Bob Pitman, director of Bartholomew County Senior Center, Columbus, IN, and chair of NCOA’s National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC).

Pitman’s center started operating in a house near the downtown district in 1956, moving to a 14,000-square-foot historic former water works and power house in 1976. A satellite center in a shopping center was opened in 2002 to allow expansion of programming. The ever-growing number of services and programs quickly became scattered

throughout the county, prompting the launch of a major project—the construction of what’s being called the Mill Race Center. With a sprawling 30,000 square feet, the center will open its doors in a downtown park in 2010.



*An annual dinner dance at Bartholomew County Senior Center in Columbus, IN, helps attract younger seniors to the center, as well as people from the surrounding community.*



*Seniors and youngsters explore the joy of acting together during the Donelson Center's intergenerational theater camp each summer.*

“Mill Race Center will be a one-stop shop, bringing together offerings that are now in several locations,” Pitman said. “It will feature modern classrooms and a technology lab, adult day services, a large fitness area, and extensive wellness programs to be offered in partnership with the local hospital.”

“Evidence-based programs—primarily in health and fitness—are starting to become the norm in many senior centers,” Pitman added. “Self-reported outcomes consistently show that seniors make close friends and feel physically and mentally better as a result of senior center participation. I believe that demonstrating these and other tangible benefits will help attract funding to develop innovative, successful programs for the current generation of seniors and generations to come.”

Mill Race Center, whose slogan is “a community center for active adults,” will be open from early in the morning until late into the evening. It will function as a more traditional

## ON THE LOOKOUT FOR NEW MODELS

NCOA's National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) has assembled a New Models Task Force to identify senior centers across the nation that are developing innovative ways to meet the needs and interests of the baby boomers and beyond.

Eleven task force members, all professionals who work or have worked in the senior center arena, are looking at new models with regard to their funding, structure, facility, programs, collaborations, staffing, and marketing.

“We are seeking models that are innovative, sustainable, and that can be replicated in other communities, even though centers' resources and capabilities may vary,” said Peter Thompson, executive director of Senior Center, Inc., and chair of the task force.

“We will not necessarily be selecting centers that are the ‘best;’ rather we are developing a typology of these new models. Then we are identifying and profiling case studies with models that have successfully attracted program participants,” said Thompson.

A wealth of information will be available to senior center administrators to assist them in learning about and implementing new programs. This includes contact information of profiled centers and program information on NCOA's Web site ([www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)). More information on study findings will be shared at the NCOA-American Society on Aging 2008 Aging in America conference in Washington, DC, in March.

For more information about the task force, contact Peter Thompson at [peter@seniorcenterinc.org](mailto:peter@seniorcenterinc.org) or (434) 974-7756. ♦



senior center during the day, but its programs will be geared to attract younger seniors and boomers in the late afternoon and evening.

### **New Activities, New Funding**

Maintaining a healthy revenue stream requires entrepreneurial thinking and is driving many senior centers to revamp their offerings, as well. As a private nonprofit organization, Senior Center, Inc., in Charlottesville, VA, receives no government funding and has had to develop keen strategies to keep a competitive edge.

“We position ourselves two ways in the community,” explained Peter Thompson, executive director of Senior Center, Inc., and chair of the NISC New Models Task Force, which is examining new opportunities for senior centers nationwide (see sidebar). “First as a hip place to be to increase membership, and second, as a nonprofit organization that has a positive impact in our community to encourage philanthropic support of the center.” He says the center has done well in achieving both goals.

A key to its success has been partnership. “Many leading senior centers do a lot of collaboration to ensure a breadth and depth of programs are delivered,” Thompson said.



*Participants at Senior Center, Inc., in Charlottesville, VA, have a variety of activities to choose from to stay mentally and physically active. Jim Kauffman, a member of the Flashbacks jazz ensemble, performs at a community event, while the Retreads, the center’s softball team, swing for the bleachers during the summer months.*

His center has brought in programs such as yoga for people with Parkinson’s disease by working with the National Parkinson’s Foundation, and it now has one of the best aquatic exercise programs in the country thanks to a collaboration with Atlantic Coast Athletic Club, a private wellness organization, Thompson said.

The Sunshine Center in St Petersburg, FL, has been involved with 150 agencies in some capacity over the years and has provided office space to many that offer resources to center participants free of charge or for a nominal fee. Two examples are a consumer protection program of the Attorney General’s Office and community-based mental health services, sponsored by the Older Americans Act, to address issues related to aging.

Other relationships tied to Sunshine have brought together center participants and other community members of all ages, with evening shuffleboard, located on the center’s downtown park campus, being a prime example, according to Jay Morgan, manager of the Office on Aging for the city of St. Petersburg, which oversees Sunshine and several other senior centers in the area.

Red Mountain Senior Center in Mesa, AZ, which is under the auspices of East Valley

Senior Services, has a unique collaboration with a local law enforcement agency.

“We had a Senior Police Academy that met for 12 weeks to learn some of the operations of the police department,” said Dan Taylor, East Valley Senior Services executive director. “The 28 participants had the opportunity to observe a police robot that seeks out information at sites where there is probable or known danger. They learned under what circumstances to call the police and how to report identity theft or elder abuse, which has proven to be valuable as these are very much underreported crimes,” he explained.

Taylor also has secured a capacity building grant through the local area agency on aging and used it to hire a community liaison to increase his center’s visibility in the community, relay a positive image, and generate revenue. Taylor believes that creating this staff position has had positive, tangible results.

“At our senior expo last November, we increased revenue by 30 percent to net \$49,000. I believe that the work of our community liaison is directly related to our growth in revenue and in the number of business partners we have developed relationships with,” he said.

### **New Ways of Thinking**

It is not just building and programs, but mindsets, too, that help define “cutting edge,” believes Melinda Davis, executive director of the Lou Walker Senior Center in Lithonia, GA.

“I did not want a staff with old mindsets,” Davis said. “I have hired people who have worked with me previously who I know are

forward thinking. When I meet potential employees for the first time, I always ask, ‘What do you think of when you hear the word senior?’ It’s important that they see mature adults are often vibrant, very productive people.”

**“We knew that traditional models of senior centers were not going to work, especially with the baby boomers who are the emerging generation of older adults.”**

Many centers are shying away from the term “senior” altogether. They are using terms like “Club 50” and “The Next Chapter,” to create a venue for people to connect with peers, as well as find meaningful work and other support as they enter the second half of life.

Lou Walker uses the slogan “Celebrating the Seniority of Life.” Program offerings fall into various categories referred to as “corridors of life.” Among the corridors are arts and entertainment with curricula like acting and interior decorating, and technology with classes from beginning Microsoft Word to digital photography.

“We have set up our programs as they are because we knew that traditional models of senior centers were not going to work, especially with the baby boomers who are the emerging generation of older adults,” Davis explained. “To be on target, we ask seniors coming here to tell us what they want, and what they want is choices and no restrictions. They want to be able to come and go rather than have a regimented, one size-fits-all program.” ♦

