



THE AGE OF **Fitness**

Staying Active is Important in Every Generation

Older adults can see great improvements in their health through physical fitness programs. States are now beginning to realize the benefits of getting the baby boomer generation involved in physical activity, and are developing programs to encourage and facilitate that activity.

By Mary Branham Dusenberry



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—Nancy Whitelaw, director
Center for Healthy Aging

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ancy Whitelaw has some advice for policymakers developing physical activity programs in their states.

“Don’t leave older adults out,” said Whitelaw, director of the national Center for Healthy Aging and a senior vice president of the National Council on Aging. “There’s just such

a tendency around walking programs and prevention campaigns and anti-obesity efforts to not include older people. But they can make tremendous gains.”

Whitelaw should know. The Administration on Aging, of which her center is a part, has launched a grants program and a public-private partnership to increase older people’s access to programs that have proven effective in reducing the risk of disease, disability and injury. Exercise programs are included.

“It’s more than just telling people they should walk more,” Whitelaw said. “These are actually interventions that have gone through randomized trials.”

The evidence-based programs that have gone through the demonstration project phase have made a difference in wellness levels, Whitelaw said. The programs that received the grants in September will reflect collaboration between state offices on aging and health departments working with private groups. Whitelaw said 38 states submitted proposals, and 12 were expected to be funded.

“There’s a lot of work going on trying to promote effective low-cost physical activity programs for older adults to bring recognition of the value to the community,” she said.

The Programs

Project Enhance in Washington state is an evidence-based program which backs that up. Director Susan Snyder said the program began in the early 1990s as a study in which a group exercise class was offered.

“The results were very positive,” Snyder said. “The participants had decreased pain, decreases in depression. They were more physically active, more socially connected and less isolated.”

The program soon expanded outside that center, and eventually into several Washington counties. Project Enhance eventually developed a training manual for instructors, and began offering classes to organizations that wanted to offer the program.

The key to success of these programs, Snyder and others believe, is the partnership between governments and private entities.

“I don’t think you can run good programs without having strong partnerships with people at all levels,” Snyder said.

The Aging Texas Well program recognizes the importance of public-private partnerships, according to Coordinator Michael Wilson. The program was formalized by Gov. Rick Perry in 2005.

“It’s his vision and his interest,” Wilson said, “to draw together all the important domains within a person’s life experience. Physical health is a key domain that helps insure quality of life.”

Texas encourages fitness through the Texercise program, the statewide physical fitness campaign administered through the Texas Department of Aging. It’s targeted to all age levels.

The strength of Texercise, Wilson says, is that it functions through statewide partners, including DADS—the Department of Aging and Disability Services—health insurers, fitness centers and area agencies on aging.

One such agency, the North Central Texas Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging, is using the Texercise program as its model, but plans to make it a more active program, said Doni Van Ryswyk, manager of aging programs.

“The research suggests older adults, and all adults, tend to stick with programs better if they’re active and not passive,” Van Ryswyk said. Passive programs are those programs that give out information about health and exercise. Van Ryswyk will add a clinical component to make Texercise a more active program.

“We really need encouragement from friends and professionals,” Van Ryswyk said.

Why States Care

Van Ryswyk is interested in seeing her program participants become more active because she’s convinced their health will improve. But she also thinks when the health of older individuals improves, the state and its taxpayers will benefit.

“Texas is facing escalating health care costs through the Medicaid program. Medicare costs are going up all the time,” she said. “Prevention makes so much more sense. If we can take somebody who is obese and has high blood pressure and get her involved in an exercise program, she’s less likely to have a heart attack, less likely to spend time in ICU.”

Van Ryswyk said many times, the government programs focus on skilled care, “but they don’t always do a good job of paying for preventive care and try to avoid some of the high tech expensive care.”

Van Ryswyk isn’t alone in her assessment of the benefits of preventive care. A recent analysis of Medicare costs and patient data found that obesity and certain chronic conditions were major factors driving virtually all Medicare spending growth for the past 15 years.

The study, by economists Kenneth Thorpe and David Howard, found that the rate of obesity among Medicare patients doubled from 1987 to 2002, and spending on those individuals more than doubled.

“What this study tells us is that we need to aggressively put in place interventions to deal with obesity and chronic disease prevalence among the elderly to control spending,” Thorpe, chairman of the Department of Health Policy Management at Emory University, told *USA Today*.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—in announcing the grants program for evidence-based programs—said it had generated a growing body of scientific evidence on the effectiveness of intervention programs addressing nutrition and diet, exercise and avoiding injuries such as falls.

“The Medicaid population and costs are important and do benefit from these types of programs,” Wilson said. “The state of Texas is always looking for opportunities to provide chronic disease management to partners across the state and in local communities.

Stated Briefly:

- State health initiatives should include the elderly.
- Public-private partnerships make programs stronger.
- Active programs that work with participants produce tangible results.
- Preventative care pays: when elderly citizens’ health improves, the state and taxpayers benefit.

“Through exercise, physical fitness and good nutrition, the state hopes to make a dent in costs associated with these diseases and conditions.”

Aging Texas Well has seen a difference in the health and fitness of older adults in communities where health and fitness programs are established, according to Wilson.

“It makes sense on so many levels,” said Van Ryswyk. “First of all on an individual level, research shows that most of the health problems that older adults confront are modifiable through lifestyle choices. If people engage in regular activity and make sound eating choices, they will be more likely to be healthy, to be independent, to spend less money on medical services and to be happier.”

Many communities across the country have programs for their elderly population. Marcia Ory, PhD, MPH, of the Active for Life program in Texas, said that’s the good news. The bad news, she said, is that not every community in America has such a program.

“We know, for example, that stoplights are really good for preventing road hazards,” she said. “This would be like some communities having stoplights and others don’t.”

“The key is to figure out what has enabled these communities to get these programs for their seniors and how these programs can be picked up by other communities and other states,” Ory said.

Active for Life works to make information about effective programs available to other states and communities. While the focus is not exclusively on older adults, information is available for that age group as well as for younger people and school age children.

Ory, in a presentation this summer at a Healthy States Summit, said barriers to physical activity—including assumptions older people don’t need to be active, lack of programs or policies targeted to older people, not having the ability to become more active and failure to translate research to practice—can be overcome.

She tells the story of Ted, an 82-year-old World War II veteran. Before the program, Ory told Healthy States attendees, Ted was a recluse with stiff aching joints and poor eating and exercise habits. After the program, he had an improved mental attitude, experienced less stiffness and aching in his joints and walks two miles every day.

His story is not uncommon, according to those who work with the elderly population in exercise programs.

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North Central Texas Council of Governments

lems,” Van Ryswyk said. “But people who are frail can benefit from exercise because regular exercise can improve strength, endurance, flexibility and also has a lot of mental health benefits as well.”

Getting Involved

Physical activity is important at any age, and plays a major role in helping people avoid chronic diseases as they get older.

“We see headlines every day about how being more active seems to be related to lowering the risks of diabetes, cognitive impairment,” Whitelaw said.

The flip side, she said, is that people recognize that medicine and medical care are not the same thing as health.

“Medical interventions are important,” Whitelaw said, “and we need good strong medical care systems, but they can’t compensate for unhealthy environments and unhealthy lifestyles.”

Reaching the goals of physical activity programs will require creative thinking on the parts of participants. Van Ryswyk said if a doctor encourages an elderly patient to exercise, but she doesn’t feel safe in the neighborhood in which she lives, that may not be possible. That’s why it’s important program participants be given options—what they think they can keep up with on a regular basis.

Her programs will also reach out to an underserved population, those people who live in congregate facilities such as group homes or assisted living facilities.

Those involved in exercise programs for older adults agree it’ll take a village of community groups along with state governments to bring success.

States should be involved, Snyder says, because they want their citizens to be healthy. “They should be involved because they care about their constituents being able to lead productive lives and be a part of the community. Health care costs are eating up a lot of the resources that could—if those costs weren’t so high—go into other programs.”

Washington’s Project Enhance has evidence to show it works.

“There is a substantial decrease in health care costs for people taking the classes compared to similar folks who are not taking the class,” Snyder said. “If you can decrease costs for a small number of those people, you’re going to have resources used for that available for other programming or services needed in that state.”

—Mary Branham Dusenberry is the managing editor of *State News magazine*.

For more information on health and fitness programs for older adults, visit these Web sites:

- www.cfah.org
- www.dads.state.tx.us
- www.agingtexaswell.org
- www.projectenhance.org
- www.healthystates.csg.org