

Critical Factors in the Successful Utilization of Senior Center Meals



NYC Department for the Aging



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*Critical Factors in the Successful Utilization
of Senior Center Meals*

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Letter From The Commissioner

Meals utilization in Department for the Aging (DFTA)-funded senior centers has been declining over the past several years. *In Fiscal Year 2005, almost one million fewer meals were served in DFTA-funded senior centers than had been served in Fiscal Year 1998, a decrease of 11%.^{1, 2}* Between Fiscal Year 2002 and Fiscal Year 2005, the percentage of senior centers operating at 90% or more of meals capacity declined from 81% to 70%. Declining meals utilization in DFTA-funded senior centers is a serious concern to the Department and has potentially profound implications for the future of congregate services in the City of New York.

Funding for meals in congregate settings (i.e., senior centers) is the bedrock upon which aging services have been built and maintained for nearly 40 years. The federal government created this paradigm some 40 years ago through its Older Americans Act funding allocations, which were overwhelmingly for congregate meals. Over the intervening years both state and local allocations have followed this pattern. Even today, with dedicated funding streams for many other services having been created in recent years, more than a quarter of the Department's federal, state and local appropriations are earmarked for congregate meals, more than for any other service.

Moreover, we know that with poverty increasing in New York City at nearly double the national rate³, and with the growth of the City's minority elderly population, which is at greater risk of living in poverty, there is a growing number of older New Yorkers who are at risk of malnutrition or "food insecurity." The fact that meals utilization at DFTA-funded senior centers is decreasing during this time is a missed opportunity that is regrettable and demands attention.

Meanwhile, despite the overall decline in meals utilization at DFTA-funded senior centers, some centers trend in the opposite direction. Indeed, there are recent examples of centers that were underutilized in terms of congregate meals, but have quickly and dramatically reversed this trend to full, or greater than full, utilization. Are these centers anomalies whose situations are so unique that they have nothing to tell us about how to increase meals utilization? Or are there strategies and practices common to these successful centers that could be replicated by others to produce similar turnarounds?

It was these concerns and questions that prompted me to authorize a study of meals utilization at DFTA-funded senior centers. The following report is the product of that study. I am happy to report that the news is hopeful. ***The most heartening finding of the study is that it is not only possible to increase meals utilization—even at seriously underutilized centers—but also that there are strategies and practices that can be learned to make such a transformation possible.***

¹The City's Fiscal Year begins on July 1, and is named after the calendar year during which it ends. Thus Fiscal Year 2005 begins on July 1, 2004.

² In FY 1998, 9,120,774 meals were served in DFTA-funded senior centers. In FY 2005, the number of meals served had declined to 8,356,502, a decrease of 953,882 meals.

³ The poverty rate for people aged 60+ in New York City increased from 16.5% in 1990 to 17.8% in 2000, while the national poverty rate for people aged 60+ in 2000 was 9.9%. Also, minorities account for 47% of the NYC 60+ population. Source: U.S. Census Data, 2000.

It is in the spirit of partnership that the Department issues this report. Our intent in publishing the findings of our study is not to issue a by-the-numbers, one-size-fits-all mandate for change. Rather, it is our hope that by sharing what we have learned from a group of center directors who faced and met daunting challenges, we may be of service in two ways. First, by shedding light on the common strategies those directors (and in some cases their sponsors) used to effect change, we may empower others with useful suggestions to increase and/or sustain center utilization. Second, we hope that the results of this study will prompt an on-going discussion about, and sharing of, other practices and strategies that center sponsors, directors and staff are using to promote increased utilization of their centers.

Edwin Méndez–Santiago, LCSW
Commissioner
NYC Department for the Aging

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We also wish to thank Edwin Méndez-Santiago, Commissioner of the New York City Department for the Aging, for giving us the opportunity to investigate this significant topic and for his support and insight at every stage of our study.

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Robert Stephens and Helen Kwah
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INTRODUCTION

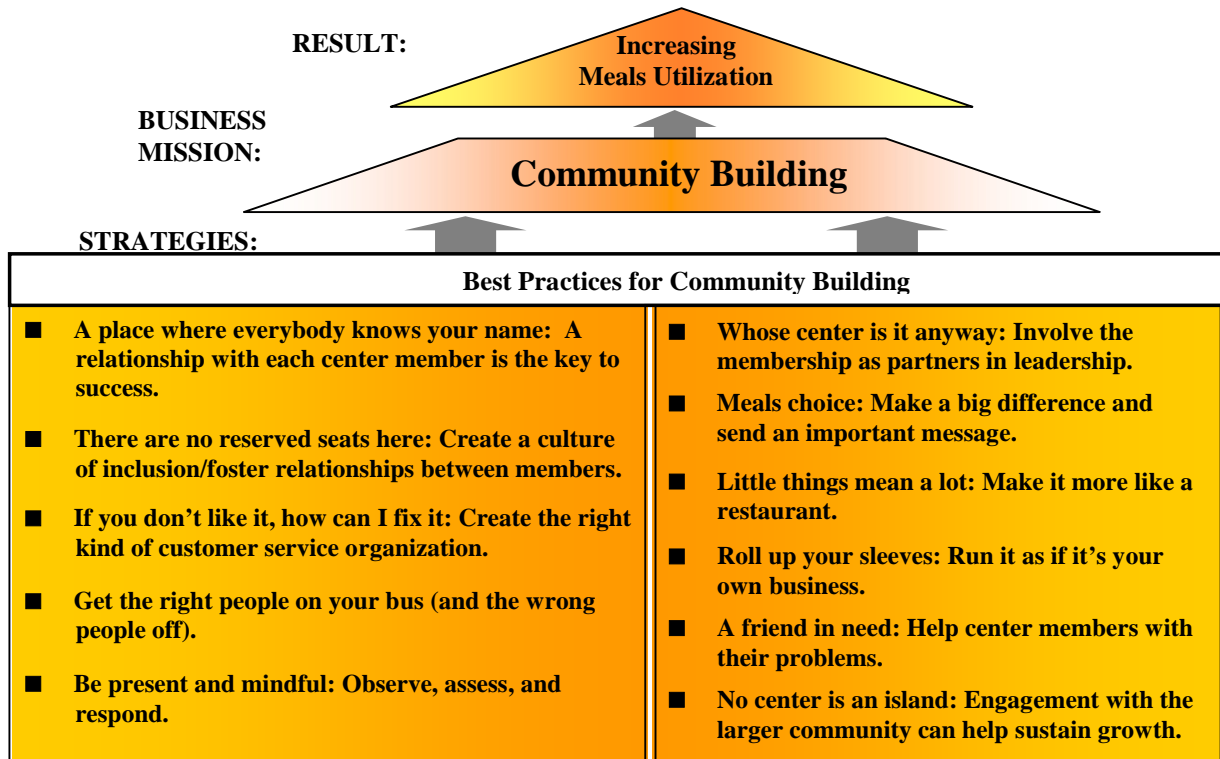
Introduction

In Fall 2004, the Commissioner of the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA), Edwin Méndez-Santiago, charged his Director of Organization Development and Training, Robert Stephens, to identify the reasons why some senior centers were meeting or exceeding their projected utilization of meals and others were not. The study that Mr. Stephens, his staff and others at DFTA conducted proceeded in three phases. The principle findings of the study on factors critical to the successful utilization of senior center meals are these:

- Leadership—particularly by the center director—is central to the successful utilization of a center’s meals.
- To create a successfully utilized senior center, the center leadership must be profoundly committed to, and adept at, creating and maintaining a community for the center members—both current and potential.
- The center’s sponsor plays a crucial role in sustaining center growth *over time*, in part by establishing high performance standards and monitoring consistently for their achievement.
- It is possible to increase meals utilization—even at seriously underutilized centers faced with difficulties such as poor geographic location, less-than-ideal physical plant and competition from other nearby centers.

In the final phase of the study, a group of centers were examined that had successfully turned around their meals utilization from underutilized to full, or greater than full, utilization. That examination identified common, and replicable, practices that had promoted the utilization turnaround. The following are the practices that were identified:

Leadership Model: Mission and Strategic Practices for Increasing Senior Center Meals Utilization



Chapter 1

THE STUDY

This chapter details the study begun in the fall of 2004 to identify the reasons why some NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA)-funded senior centers were meeting or exceeding their projected utilization of meals and others were not. This study was conducted by DFTA staff at the behest of the Commissioner of the Department for the Aging. The study was conducted in three phases.

Phase 1

The search for the critical factors influencing senior center meals utilization began with three focus group meetings. All of the directors of DFTA-funded senior centers that had achieved 100% or more of their projected meals utilization in Fiscal Year 2004 were invited to attend these group interviews (See Appendix A for a list of those who participated). The focus group interviews were followed by visits to some of the high-performing centers, during which individual and group discussions were held with staff and members of these centers.

Directors in the focus group interviews were asked several open-ended questions to explore their understanding of why their centers were fully achieving their meals goals when the majority of DFTA-funded centers were not. Several variables and their relative impact on meals utilization were examined with the directors of the high-performing centers. The variables explored included:

- quality of the meals,
- location of the center in the neighborhood and its proximity to/availability of public transportation,
- amount of physical space in the center and its condition,
- involvement or lack thereof of the center's sponsor,
- role and quality of the center's management staff,
- amount and type of center programming,
- number of other centers in the neighborhood,
- amount and quality of collaboration with other service providers in the center's community, and
- type and amount of outreach and marketing efforts.

These group interviews provided valuable insights into the major factors influencing meals utilization (which are detailed in Chapter 2 of this report), but also demonstrated the need for further exploration.

Phase 2

In February 2005, the study turned to the exploration of the impact of 10 additional variables on increasing or decreasing senior center meals utilization. The 10 variables that were examined in this phase (Phase 2) of the study were:

- whether meals were prepared on-site or catered,
- whether founding center members were still active and in positions of leadership,
- whether the center was part of a larger organization or a "stand-alone" center,
- the percentage of seniors who were living in poverty in the center's surrounding community,
- the director's length of employment in her/his position,
- whether the director was employed by the center prior to becoming a director,
- the director's experience working with seniors prior to becoming director,
- the educational level of the director,
- the amount of training the director had received since appointment, and
- the director's salary.

In addition, the variable of how facilities at highly utilized centers compared to those of underutilized centers that was explored in Phase 1 of the study was examined in greater depth in this phase. To assess whether these variables played a role in the utilization of meals, telephone

interviews were conducted with two groups of senior center directors: those whose centers had met or exceeded their projected number of congregate lunch meals (“highly utilized centers”) in FY 2004, and those whose centers were below 90% of their projected number of congregate lunch meals (“underutilized centers”) for the same period. The groups of approximately 50 each were adjusted to be statistically valid and reliable, stratified random samples. In addition to telephone interviews, United States Census data was used to examine poverty rates in the communities in which the centers were located and salary records from agency contracts were reviewed.

With one exception (educational level of the director), there was no statistically significant difference in the variables studied between highly utilized and underutilized centers (see Appendix B for a summary of the complete results of Phase 2 of the study). However, eliminating these variables as contributors to meals utilization made it possible to commence a third and final phase of the study which examined more intensely the preliminary findings of Phase 1.

Phase 3

The purpose of the third phase of the study was to identify commonly used practices that promoted higher meals utilization in senior centers. The first challenge of this phase was to identify a particular group of highly utilized centers whose experience would be most likely to produce *replicable* best practices. Specifically, in order to provide information and replicable practices for underutilized centers on how to remedy their underutilization, the centers chosen for Phase 3 of the study had to exhibit the following four characteristics:

- One, a significant underutilization of meals followed by a *significant and sustained* increase in meals to full, or greater than full, utilization (i.e., “a turnaround”) over a period of time that has continued to the present;
- Two, a turnaround in utilization that had occurred *within the last few years*, thereby making it easier for directors currently experiencing a decline in meals utilization to identify with the turnaround strategies and practices employed and therefore more likely to try to replicate them;
- Three, a director present during the turnaround period who was still leading the center or otherwise available, from whom we could learn what actions had or had not been critical to the turnaround; and,
- Four, an increase in meals utilization that could *not* be attributed to any of the following three external factors (and thus not broadly replicable):
 - 1) having been relocated to a new, vibrant, more accessible and/or spacious facility or site just prior to the increase in meals utilization,
 - 2) being located in an area of rapid growth of a particular immigrant population where there were *no* other senior centers serving that population,
 - 3) being located in a community district where there has been a substantial increase in the population aged 60 and over (see Appendix C, Table 1 for data on senior population changes in the community districts for the senior centers included in Phase 3 of this study).

After a lengthy search, eight centers were identified which met the four selection criteria.^{4,5,6}

⁴The search for centers that met these criteria was hampered by the lack of long-term electronic data on meals utilization in DFTA-funded centers. The Department’s Information Technology Unit had reliable electronic data for only the prior three fiscal years, and only for those centers whose “program ID number” had not changed due to a change in sponsorship or other reason. It is possible that there were other centers which met these criteria that could not be identified because of program ID number changes. Ultimately, with help from the leadership of the Department’s Bureau of Community Services, it was possible to identify the eight centers which met the selection criteria.

⁵Because they did not meet the selection criteria, no senior centers that serve primarily an Asian-American population could be included in this study despite the fact that most of these centers are at or above full meals utilization. However, a focus group with the directors of the centers serving primarily Asian-Americans was

Once the eight centers which met the four selection criteria were identified, on-site interviews were conducted with the directors (and in some instances with sponsors and/or staff), members at the centers were interviewed, hundreds of customer satisfaction surveys were administered to the center members, the physical environment and the interaction between staff and members and between members and other members were observed, and the meals served at the centers were sampled. All these methodologies were used to identify common strategies and best practices that each center's leadership used (and was continuing to use) to "turn around" the center from underutilization to full, or greater than full, meals utilization. This phase of the study was conducted in the spring, summer and fall of 2005.

conducted in May 2006 to assess if and how the report's findings correlated to their running successfully utilized centers. At this focus group, the directors unanimously agreed that the report's findings concurred with their experiences and practices. These directors also contributed strategies to the "Handbook of Practice Suggestions" (Appendix E). See Appendix D for the names of this focus group's participants.

⁶It is important to note that there were and are several more senior centers that are highly successful and are run by the same directors who presided over their growth. These centers and their directors are worthy of further investigation. However, for this phase of our investigation these centers did not meet all four of the selection characteristics and therefore could not be chosen for inclusion in the final phase of this study.

Chapter 2

THE FINDINGS

The following are the major findings to emerge from the study to identify critical factors in the utilization of senior center meals.

- ***Increasing meals utilization is possible.***

An important discovery of the study was that not only is it possible to increase utilization—even at seriously underutilized centers faced with difficulties such as poor geographic location, less-than-ideal physical plant and competition from other nearby centers—but also that it is possible to do so quickly. Most of the successful centers studied indicated substantial increases in meals utilization within the first three months of the takeover of new leadership. This discovery affirms the hope, embedded within this report, that by understanding and learning how to apply the report’s major findings and practices, it is possible to increase utilization at any senior center—and do so quickly.

- ***The leadership provided by the center director is central to the successful utilization of a center’s meals.***

The directors who were at the center of the study were skillful managers. They thought strategically; they knew what the business mission of their centers was (see below) and were able to articulate this vision to both staff and members of the center. They were also remarkably focused and disciplined in their pursuit of this mission, not becoming distracted by extraneous activities or demands. While not afraid to try various strategies to achieve the business mission, they remained outcome-driven; if a strategy did not produce results they would acknowledge its lack of success and move on.

These directors were also aware that achieving the mission of their centers depended in large part on getting staff, be they paid or volunteer, with the right skills, including the ability to provide outstanding customer service⁷ and to be culturally and linguistically competent⁸. Where necessary they worked hard with staff to develop and/or improve their job skills. But when achieving the mission of creating a community for the present and potential members demanded moving a staff person or volunteer to a more appropriate position in the center or terminating his or her employment, these directors demonstrated their commitment to the mission and did what needed to be done.

⁷ Providing customer service in a senior center is not about blindly following a “hospitality” script. Rather, it is defined as everything the director, staff (paid and volunteer), senior leadership and sponsor do to listen to, meet and give voice to the needs and wants of senior center members. Customer service is also about addressing the members’ concerns and issues with respect, diligence and feedback. In addition, *customer service in a senior center setting is about changing the culture from one of institutional mandates to one of giving the members choices and letting them define what they want.* Obviously, community building and providing customer service overlap as one feeds into the other: providing quality customer service leads to individuals feeling cared for, which leads to a sense of belonging to the place or community. Similarly, the building of community is based on understanding the community as a group of people with needs and wants, which is the focus of customer service.

⁸ Cultural competence is the knowledge and interpersonal skills needed to understand, appreciate and work with individuals from cultures other than one’s own. It involves an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, awareness of one’s own assumptions, knowledge of different cultures and adaptation of one’s skills and methods to enable and enhance communications. For example, a culturally competent senior center director strives to learn about a member’s cultural beliefs and values. This director will also interact with the member in his or her preferred language or find someone who can. Such a director will also know the surrounding community’s formal and informal cultural resources and mobilize them to make the center more welcoming and helpful to a diverse membership.

Moreover, the directors of successfully utilized centers demonstrated superior supervisory skills (e.g., communication, delegation, motivation, coaching). They were, according to the staff who reported to them, team-oriented and great role models who knew how to be rigorous, not ruthless, in their expectations and treatment of staff.

These directors were also extraordinarily committed to the success of their programs, often going the extra mile to get the job done. They visited hospitalized center members, attended wakes and funerals when a member's loved one died, were actively engaged in their communities, learned how to do the jobs their staff performed and pitched in whenever and however needed to keep their operations running (e.g., preparing food, mopping floors, driving vans, unpacking supplies). In short, they did whatever it took to make sure the center functioned at its best. And, rather than feeling overwhelmed or discouraged by the challenges of the job, these only seemed to further ignite their deep commitment. In one way or another, several directors said they loved a challenge. To them these were just opportunities.

Finally, the directors in the study rigorously followed certain core principles and practices to achieve their results. These core practices are detailed in the next chapter of this report (see Chapter 3: "The Practices").

- ***Building a community is the business mission of successfully utilized centers.***

The center directors in the study, and in some cases their sponsors, understood intuitively that the mission of their centers was *not* to provide meals, or programs, or case assistance. Instead, they understood that these and other program components are strategies to achieve their central mission, which is to create a community for the present and potential members of the center. Good meals, rich and diverse programming, a spacious and modern physical plant and a full-service member assistance program are all desirable, and most of the center staff and sponsors we studied were working very hard to develop and/or maintain these program components. However, none of these components are what finally grow and retain a loyal membership. Rather, ***to create a successfully utilized senior center, the center leadership must be profoundly committed to, and adept at, creating and maintaining a community for the center members—both current and potential.*** When this is the case, centers are able to overcome the many challenges they face (e.g., inadequate salaries, poor geographic location, difficult physical environment, competition from nearby centers).

The meaning of the term "community building"⁹ in a senior center context is about everything that the center leadership—particularly the director but also paid and volunteer staff, senior leadership and the sponsor—does to create a sense of home, a feeling of belonging, connections between the members and hence a "community" amongst the membership of the center.

An older person may initially come to a center because of an interesting trip, educational program or recreational activity. Or s/he may come initially because s/he needs help understanding the meaning of an official letter, accessing a publicly-funded service or dealing with a harassing landlord. S/he may even come initially because s/he wants or needs a

⁹Traditionally, "community building" refers to efforts by public health, social services, and urban development organizations to improve quality of life or promote social justice through programs that focus on identifying a community's assets, building relationships among a community's individuals and groups, and empowering a community's stakeholders to take part in planning and decision-making. In a profit-driven context, especially with the rise of internet-based businesses, the term has also come to mean a marketing practice which builds a community of product or service users who group together socially around a shared enthusiasm for the product or service. The commercial benefit of fostering such a community is the high degree of customer loyalty that leads to word-of-mouth advertising for the product or service.

nutritious inexpensive meal. However, if s/he does not feel welcomed in the center, if s/he does not feel a sense of belonging, if s/he does not make a connection to others (be they staff or members), s/he will not stay long. In surveys of and discussions with center members, they consistently indicated that the most important reason for their attending a center was some variation of, “It feels like home.” When asked if they would still attend their center if meals were *not* served, 95% of the seniors interviewed said yes. When asked why, the representative answers were: “They [staff] treat you like family,” “The staff care about you,” “Everyone is friendly and welcoming,” “The staff are very conscientious and helpful, they listen to you and answer your questions,” “The staff seem happy working here, and that affects how they treat people,” “I come to see and be with people,” and, “I enjoy meeting new people and connecting with the friends I’ve made here.”

- ***An actively involved sponsoring organization is crucial to a center’s sustaining meals utilization over time.***

It is hard work to transform an underutilized center to one of full, or greater than full, meals utilization as the directors and staff of the eight centers in Phase 3 of the study detailed. But, perhaps even harder than leading the initial turnaround in utilization is sustaining it over the long term. Once growth has been accomplished it must be maintained day-to-day. Managing the everyday operations and “crises” (e.g., floods, cooks out sick, air conditioner breakdowns) without losing sight of the big picture, and while still keeping the center growing and evolving, is as great a challenge as leading the initial turnaround in utilization.

The active involvement of the sponsor, working consistently and collaboratively with the center director, is a vital asset in sustaining utilization over the long term. A positive partnership between sponsor and director leads to better problem solving, greater innovation, increased resource development and sustained energy. While a strong center director may be able to lead the initial turnaround in utilization, without such a partnership even the most enterprising and energetic director is likely to grow weary or burn out over time.

Moreover, the sponsor that is actively involved plays an essential role in sustaining growth by holding the center management accountable to high performance standards. Just as it is critical for the center director to be a model for his or her staff, so too is it important for the center’s sponsor to provide leadership for the center director. Clearly communicated and consistently required accountability by the sponsor helps ensure quality performance over time.

In addition, the sponsor is critical to sustaining the center’s growth and quality by being involved in the organization’s long-range planning, including succession planning. Too often, a center prospers under a director with the leadership qualities described above only to decline when that director leaves. The sponsor that has been actively involved in the oversight of and planning with the center director intimately knows the goals and needs of the program and can smooth the transition from one competent administration to the next. Often this comes through the director and sponsor grooming the next generation of leadership from within. But it may also mean a sponsor knowledgeable about the critical factors contributing to center utilization and therefore better able to identify an appropriate candidate from outside the organization when a replacement is needed.

Chapter 3

THE PRACTICES

**Leadership Model: Mission and Strategic Practices
for Increasing Senior Center Meals Utilization**



*The meaning of the term “**community building**” in a senior center context is about everything that the center leadership—particularly the director but also paid and volunteer staff, senior leadership and the sponsor—does to create a sense of home, a sense of belonging, connections between the members and hence a “community” amongst the membership of the center.

The study identified practices that were common to the centers that had turned around their meals utilization from underutilized to full, or greater than full, utilization. This chapter is devoted to a discussion of these best practices.¹⁰

It must be noted that these practices will *not* be successful if employed mechanically. They will be useful only insofar as they are genuine manifestations of the center director's commitment to, and caring for, the center's membership and passion for the work itself. As stated earlier, directors who are successful at growing their centers lead from the heart as well as from the head. It is their "caring about making the lives of the seniors better" that invests their actions with authenticity and power. Lacking this caring and commitment, even these "best practices" will not ring true to the very membership/community the director seeks to grow.

- ***A place where everybody knows your name: A relationship with each center member is the key to success.*** We all need to feel that we belong somewhere. For the vast majority of the senior center members we surveyed, the most important reason they came to their center was because "I feel at home here, like I belong." To grow and maintain a successful center, therefore, the most important thing the center's leadership (director, staff and senior leaders) must do is create a center where seniors feel welcomed and "at home." And the key to creating such an environment is establishing a relationship with every center member.

According to the research, this process starts with a name. At some point during her on-site interview, each center director told us, "I know every member by name." Being greeted by name conveys that one is recognized as a unique individual, a person and not a number or a statistic. It says that one is not anonymous.

One center member told us she was confident that if her daughter needed to reach her at the center she (the daughter) could simply call and ask for her. "The staff here [at the center] know everybody," she said. "They would be able to find me if my daughter called." That the center served over 200 meals per day did not diminish her sense of being an individual, of being known and of belonging.

For the directors we interviewed "knowing every member by name," was a symbolic as well as literal truth. It meant they take the time and make the effort to know the seniors who come to their centers as individuals and to ***build a caring relationship with each***—and they insist that their staff do the same. "I know them all," said one director. "I know who is a diabetic. I know who has good teeth. I know who is getting chemotherapy. I know who is taking care of a sick relative, or visiting a brother in the nursing home."

Another director, when asked to explain the rapid growth of her center's meals utilization said, "I sat down and started talking with them: 'What did you do when you worked?' 'Where do you come from?' 'Do you have children?'"

A third summed up this singularly important practice well when she told us, "I know everyone by name...every day [we] talk. I have a relationship with every single member. Everyone knows me, everyone feels comfortable to talk. I try to make them feel like we're family."

¹⁰Best practices are defined here as the activities that are strategic to accomplishing the business mission of "community building." Through data collection from directors, sponsors, staff and senior center members, we discovered that there are many common strategic activities taken to foster "community building"; from these strategic activities, we have culled a set of "best practices" which are detailed in this chapter.

In a center with a large membership, where the director knowing each member individually may be more difficult, this practice is still critical to the long-term success of the center and must become a shared responsibility among the staff (i.e., each center member feels recognized and known personally by at least one staff member). The key in centers with a large membership is that the behavior of relationship building is modeled by the director. That behavior will set the standard of performance for staff and members alike.

- ***There are no reserved seats here: Create a culture of inclusion/foster relationships between members.*** Every director we spoke with emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming, inclusive environment. Many attributed the decline in attendance that preceded their tenure, at least in part, to the prior leadership's allowing the formation of cliques. One told us that when she started working there were "forty hostile women who drove everybody new away." Creating a culture of inclusion starts with the director and how she/he treats each member, old and new.

"When I first started I had to make the same announcement every day during lunch," one director told us. "I would say, 'This center belongs to every member. Everyone is welcome here. We welcome new members. We are a family here.'" This modeling by the leader sends a powerful message to members and staff and is the foundation upon which the center's culture of inclusion is built.

A strategy that every director we interviewed indicated was crucial to establishing a welcoming, inclusive culture was having the right person signing in members as they entered the center. One director told us, "The first thing I knew I had to do was replace the volunteer who was signing people in. She was unfriendly, particularly to any new person who came in. We found another volunteer job for her where she wasn't the first person everyone saw as they came in. It did wonders for increasing our membership!"

The successful directors we interviewed took other concrete steps to ensure inclusion: they established "welcoming" committees to greet new seniors and introduce them to existing members; they charged their advisory council members with sitting at a different table each day and talking to different people; they had a time on the agenda of every membership meeting when new members were introduced and welcomed; they created center "Codes of Conduct" which were reviewed and approved by the membership, in which a policy on inclusion and/or a prohibition on reserved seating (and all that that implies) was included.

Promoting a culture of inclusion is particularly essential at centers in multi-ethnic communities. Here the need to ***celebrate diversity*** and to be culturally competent is not political correctness: it is survival. One new director of a center in profound decline found that the Latino members were eating in one dining room and the African-American members in another. Her first act as director was to convert one of the rooms into a game room and consolidate the dining rooms. She told the members, "We are one center here, we eat together, we respect and take care of one another." She followed this powerfully inclusive action with "international" day celebrations, ethnically diverse menus reflecting the tastes of all groups and inter-group pool tournaments. In less than one year the center's meals utilization had gone from 40% underutilized to more than 100% utilized.

In another, seemingly non-diverse, center, the new director found that the membership included members born in sixteen different Latin American countries. When the largest group celebrated its native country's independence day the new director encouraged the action with the caveat that thereafter the members from every other country would likewise celebrate their native land's independence day. The celebrations are now among the most anticipated and

enjoyed activities on the calendar and have brought the members from various groups closer and served to grow the membership from all groups. *The key to celebrating diversity, we were told, is to treat each group equally.*

Finally, creating a climate of inclusion means looking for ways to promote connections and relationships *between* members. Relationship building will naturally occur between many members who did not know one another before attending the center. However, many successful centers actively facilitate this process to ensure that less extroverted members will have safe opportunities to get to know others, to speed up the process for those for whom it would probably have happened anyway, and to prevent or remedy the formation of cliques.

Borrowing from long-distance railway travel, for example, a number of centers in the study randomly assign lunch seating once a month. Members know in advance which day will offer the opportunity to eat with a new set of people.

In another example of promoting connections between members, one director told of bringing several members together who did not know one other but knew how to sew. She gave them the task of creating costumes for a play that other members were putting on. She knew of their common interest in sewing because of a written “talents” survey she has every new member complete. Many of these sewers developed friendships as a result of their working together and accomplishing a task.

In other centers, directors automatically assign one or more existing members as “buddies” to a new member to help the new person get acquainted with the center and its activities. In some cases, staff conduct “getting-to-know-you” exercises with these buddies to facilitate the development of relationships between the new and old members.

- ***If you don't like it, how can I fix it? If you do like it, how can I make it better? Create the right kind of customer service organization.*** The directors we interviewed took personal responsibility for knowing what their membership wanted and needed in terms of food, activities, assistance and environment. They obtained this information by formal and informal means, but like all successful “customer service” oriented entrepreneurs, the thing they did first and consistently was listen to their customers (i.e., the center membership). As one director put it, “You have to find out what the seniors like, and then you give it to them. Then you ask them if they liked it.” Similarly, several directors said, “I go table to table and ask the seniors what they liked and didn't like about the day's food.”

All used surveys and questionnaires. One director conducts a survey before putting together every cycle of menus. All use their centers' membership committees (advisory, menu planning, activities) to find out what the membership wants and what they did and did not like about the meals served, the activities conducted, the hospitality of paid and volunteer staff, etc.

Moreover, as one director made clear, quality customer service also requires results: “You not only have to try to give the members what they want in terms of food, activities and environment, but when they tell you they don't like something, you have to do your best to fix it.” Or as another put it, “When I get feedback that the potatoes were undercooked, the chicken was not hot enough or something else about the meal did not measure up, I make sure the cook gets that feedback and adjusts accordingly.”

Of course not all things can be fixed, or at least fixed in the short term. When that occurs, the successful customer service-oriented leader must share that reality with the membership,

explaining what actions were taken, what the outcome was (or was not) and what will be done in the future to honor the membership's suggestions or complaints. And, as noted above with the practice of relationship building, the directors of successful centers insist that their staff share this customer service orientation—including the cook and kitchen staff.

- ***Get the right people on your bus (and the wrong people off).*** The directors we interviewed universally understood that a passion for working with seniors was more important than prior experience or degrees. Or as one director told us, “Our staff has to be—and when we hire someone, we look for somebody who’s—really comfortable with the senior population. They can have all the degrees, a business background, but if they don’t have that, it’s just not going to work.” These directors understood that if they have the right people (volunteers as well as paid staff) the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away. The right people don’t need to be tightly managed or fired up; they will be self-motivated to produce the best results and to be part of creating something great.

Similarly, these directors knew that if they had the wrong people working for them it would not matter if they did all the other things right—they still would not have a great center. Several told us that when they started their jobs they inherited staff who did not have a love of seniors. “I had some staff, including senior volunteers, who were harsh. Their attitude was ‘take it or leave it, I don’t care.’ I worked hard with those people. We had staff meetings in which we talked about the appropriate way to speak and treat the seniors. Some changed, and some I had to let go,” said one director.

No one enjoyed the process of firing staff (paid or volunteer). All who had done it said it was the worst task they had ever had to do. But each one told us that having the right staff was such a critical component to the success of their program, and having the wrong staff was so destructive to the center’s mission, that it had to be done. All organizations must be “mission-driven” to be successful. In the case of the successful senior centers in the study that mission was, and is, to create a community for the present and potential members. If a paid or volunteer staff person was destructive to the mission of creating community, then the director took responsibility to remedy the situation.

In all cases, “getting the wrong people off the bus” had been the last resort after looking for training and/or another job where the person could excel. Even in situations where a director did not have authority to fire someone who was inappropriate for the job, she worked to persuade the person or the sponsor that the fit was detrimental to the success of the program. Incrementally, and with persistence, most have been successful.

- ***Be present and mindful: Observe, assess, respond.*** It may be self-evident that a director and her/his staff must be personally present in the center in order to build relationships and know what their membership wants, but we include this practice because it was such a consistent theme among the directors we interviewed. “I want to be able to see my seniors come in the door. When they come in the morning, I want to be able to say ‘hello’ to them. I want to have this contact with them...I want to see them,” said one director in a quote that captures a practice common to all.

Another told us, “The previous director had her office way in the back. One of the first things I did was move my office where I could see what was going on and where people could find me.” All the directors we interviewed emphasized the need for them and their staff to *be present—involved with and available to the seniors—when the members are in the center*, especially when lunch is being served and even when this means postponing paperwork until

the seniors are gone. If one must spend time in the office, we were told, then “keep the door open; let people know you are there if they need to talk.”

Being present, we learned, is also being mindful (i.e., alert and observant). It is noticing when new seniors come into the center and welcoming them. It is noticing when a member has lost weight or returned after an interval and asking how he or she feels. It is noticing the formation of cliques and intervening before the situation becomes imbedded. It is noticing what activities are popular and with whom. It is noticing who is not attending and finding out why. In short, being in the thick of things when members are present is also necessary for taking stock, for constantly assessing what is working and what is not, and looking for ways to improve and grow the center.

- ***Whose center is it, anyway: Involve the membership as partners in leadership.*** The directors we interviewed do more than articulate the belief that the center belongs to the members. In each case they have established or revitalized a dormant senior leadership structure. Establishing advisory councils was fundamental, but in the case of these directors, not sufficient. In each of their centers they have developed a much more sophisticated senior leadership structure: menu planning committees, travel committees, “sunshine” committees, activities committees, etc. Most have been quick to identify the natural leaders in the center and to recruit these opinion makers into formal leadership roles.

Moreover, these directors have placed a priority on using the membership’s intellectual, creative and leadership skills to enrich and expand the center’s activities. For example, one director told us, “When we organized the dance troupe I remembered that Carmen had been a seamstress and Maria knew how to sew, so I got them to help make the costumes.”

- ***Meals choice: Make a big difference and send an important message.*** One director summed up why it is important to increase a member’s choices by saying, “Everybody wants to feel like they have choices and options. Everyone wants to feel that they’re a valuable person in whatever situation they’re in—that they’re not just there because this is all they can afford and there’s no place else to go.” Providing choices is fundamental to the goal of customer service because the practice conveys to the customer (in this case, a center member) that he or she is in charge—that he or she has the power to make decisions for him/herself rather than being “force fed” a choice made by an institution. And, a person is more likely to return to a place where he or she feels like a customer (i.e., in charge, powerful) rather than a “check mark” on a statistics sheet.

Providing choices in meals is a practice that can be entered into incrementally over time. Clearly, not all centers can provide full meals alternatives on a regular basis, especially where kitchen staff is limited and/or where meals are catered. However, one of the directors we interviewed, who runs a catered meals program, introduced meals choices in a small way by offering members the ability to choose what kind of *cut* of meat or poultry they wanted. For example, on chicken days, each member specifies when signing in whether he or she wants a leg/thigh or breast; the member then gets a specially colored meal ticket depending on which cut he or she chose. While the director of this center continues this practice, she has moved on to offer even more choice to her members. She now orders ahead with her caterer to have a certain number of an alternative meal choice available several days of the week. This director believes that introducing meals alternatives is the most important reason for the turnaround in meals utilization at her center. As she told us, “We’re always offering the members alternatives. That’s the big reason we’re keeping them here now and not losing them to other centers on the days when they don’t like our main menu choice.”

At another center in the study, the director initially experimented with offering an alternative meal choice of either a “veggie burger” or a “salad plate” on the slowest day of the month. Doing so, she found, soon turned the slowest day into the most popular. Significantly, this turnaround in utilization occurred without the alternative meal(s) ever becoming the dominant meal choice for that day—in fact, the number of members choosing an alternative meal never exceeds 20% of the meals eaten on any day at this center. This director’s experience tells us that offering an alternative meal increases utilization in two ways: it keeps those members who do not like the main meal choice of the day at the center instead of staying home or going elsewhere, and it attracts and keeps even those who are satisfied with the main meal choice because having choices makes people feel like valued customers (i.e., in control of their lives and powerful).

While the option of choosing an alternative meal was not as formalized at the other centers in our study, most provided some kind of choice for members who did not want to or could not eat (for health reasons) the regular meal. One director told us she goes into the kitchen herself to prepare a sandwich for a member for whom “the regular lunch was ‘too much’ on the days she was receiving chemotherapy.” Another director in our study told us that “even if it’s peanut butter and jelly, we’ll find something if a member doesn’t want to eat the regular meal.”

Finding ways to provide members with an option around their meals—from the smallest choice such as deciding what kind of cut of chicken or providing a simple sandwich, to the most elaborate such as providing a regular alternative meals option—is a critical best practice that can be used at minimal or no extra cost, and even when meals are catered.

- ***Little things mean a lot: Make it more like a restaurant.*** No one is attracted to institutional settings. They are neither pleasing to our senses nor make us feel welcomed. Moreover, they remind us of times when we lacked power or resources (e.g., hospital stays, school cafeterias). In the study, we observed numerous, sometimes small but not insignificant, ways that center directors and their staff altered the environment or the service to make the experience for the membership more like a restaurant.

For example, one director we interviewed stated, “It’s the tiny things you can do: nicer napkins, even brighter light bulbs. People respond to the smallest things that you do and it is not a matter [of spending lots] of money.” Several of the centers in the study use restaurant-style serving rather than cafeteria-style and all use restaurant-style at least some of the time (parties, holidays, etc.). Most use tablecloths. Those who use round tables find they provide a more family-like and restaurant atmosphere that is especially helpful in attracting new members. Some decorate the tables with attractive items such as bouquets of plastic flowers. Others have experimented with serving bread and salad as a first course. Still others use armed chairs to help older members to get up from the table. All indicated that they do their best to serve latecomers—if only a snack.

Each director told us, in her or his way, that the smallest touches they made to make the center more inviting and restaurant-like were appreciated. As one director said, “They [the members] love that you try... just seeing that you’re trying to make the center nicer says a whole lot.” What these attempts to make the center more pleasant say to the membership, we suspect, is that the center’s leadership is committed to building a caring community and to delivering quality customer service.

- ***“Roll up your sleeves; run it as if it’s your own business,”*** said the director of one center when asked what advice she would give a new center director. Essentially the task of running a senior center can be compared to running a small business. Small business owners need to know every job their staff does in order to provide appropriate supervision and to be able to pitch in and keep the operation running smoothly whenever and wherever there is a need for extra help. The senior center directors in the study did the same.

One director we interviewed came to her program without a kitchen background and as she shared with us, “That was a brand new thing for me, I came in completely blind. I learned everything. I’d walk into the kitchen and they (the kitchen staff) would tell me I had to wear gloves. I had to learn.” This director went on to get a food-handler’s certificate.

Another director, who also learned how to run a kitchen and got a food handler’s certificate, added, “You can’t expect your staff to follow your leadership if you don’t know what they do. If you need to help in the kitchen, roll up your sleeves and help prepare the meals.” Her sentiments and practice were shared by all the directors with whom we spoke. Most said that at one time or another they had helped with some aspect of meal preparation when the kitchen was short-staffed. Others told of mopping floors, driving vans, unpacking boxes, cleaning up spills. In short, they did not shy away from what needed to be done—they treated the center as if it were their own business and did what was needed to make the business a success.

- ***A friend in need: Help the center members with their problems or find someone who can.*** The willingness and ability to help members with problems is an important element in the success of the centers we visited. Two of the directors we interviewed felt it was their case management/case assistance services that were the key to their meals utilization turnaround. “Tell your members you’re there to help. Whatever the problem let them know they can talk to you about it,” said one. Even where centers did not have the staff to provide the case management themselves, the directors indicated they had developed partnerships with other community agencies that were able to do so. It is crucial when the case work is done by another community agency that the center staff do not simply refer the member to the other agency for help. One would not just refer a family member for help and not follow up to be sure that the help had been received. Similarly, center staff must ensure that the member has received help by asking what the outcome was and whether he or she is satisfied with the service received.
- ***No center is an island: Engagement with the larger community can help sustain growth.*** Although most of the directors in the study did not see building relationships with the larger community in which they were located as playing a significant role in the *initial meals utilization turnaround* at their centers, they did maintain that being actively involved in their communities was an important strategy for sustaining growth over time. Building community relationships brought resources to the center such as speakers, health screenings, in-kind contributions of arts and craft supplies, presents at holiday times, etc. Similarly, developing relationships with other community service providers extended the center’s ability to help its membership (e.g., casework services through an area one-stop program, housing assistance from a local housing provider). Community involvement also resulted in collaborators or supporters of grant applications and increased volunteers for center activities.

The centers that were proactively involved in their communities had directors and sponsors who attended and hosted community meetings (e.g., police precinct meetings, block and civic association meetings). These directors and/or sponsors were active participants in interagency

councils and district cabinet meetings. They supported the activities of and coordinated with other community groups and service providers on events, service delivery issues and community advocacy issues. They observed their neighborhoods simply by walking around, seeing where seniors naturally congregated and talking with them.

As a result of this active involvement and critical observation they were aware of both the challenges their communities faced and the resources available to meet these challenges. This knowledge helped them initiate programs and forge partnerships to further the development of livable communities which in turn helped sustain and even expand upon their center's growth and success. For example, one director observed a growing immigrant population in her community with limited access to community resources because of a language barrier. Because of her strong relationships in the community she was able to get a volunteer who spoke the immigrants' language to provide case work services for the group's elderly members. Once these seniors began coming to the center for help accessing benefits and services, the director was able to engage them in other center activities as well.

Chapter 4

THE ROLE OF OTHER FACTORS IN INCREASING MEALS UTILIZATION

The preceding chapter details the critical strategies that directors of successfully utilized senior centers used to turn their programs around from underutilized to full, or greater than full, meals utilization. In this chapter the role of other factors examined in the study will be described. These factors, while significant, were not instrumental to the initial turnaround in meals utilization at the centers examined in the study.

- ***The right way to “market” your center.*** When they took over the leadership of their underutilized centers, a number of the ultimately successful directors in the study believed they would have to increase their meals utilization by marketing to a completely new group of seniors. Instead, what they learned was that by attending to the wants and needs of the members who were currently attending the center, their meals utilization grew rapidly—as if by magic. Of course, there was no magic. When these directors focused on building an internal community among the members, their current members became the kind of advertisement money can’t buy and marketing people pray for: *positive word of mouth*.

When current members see that the director is committed to building a community at the center where each person is welcomed, known and valued, and where each person’s needs and opinions are listened to and respected (even if they cannot always be met), they will keep coming back—and they will tell their friends and neighbors who will tell their friends and neighbors, and so on. This does not mean that special efforts to reach groups in the neighborhood who do not currently attend are not necessary and desirable. We are only observing that the ability of the centers we studied to significantly increase their meals utilization was dependent on leadership focused on the business mission of building an internal community, not on special marketing efforts or strategies.

One director, for example, told us of spending significant time in her first weeks on the job posting flyers around the neighborhood and speaking at community meetings, which in hindsight, she noted, brought no new members to the center. Rather, it was when she focused on getting to know her existing members, including finding out what meals and programming they wanted and then meeting these needs, that her meals utilization took off.

Another director wanted to see the programming at her center expand to include trips to museums and exhibitions, but her membership wasn’t interested. She shared, “I love these activities—museums and exhibitions—but I have to do what they want, not what I want them to do.”

A third director thought the wave of the future was to offer food a la carte, as in an omelet bar, but when the membership was surveyed they unanimously rejected the idea. This director noted, “Perhaps in five years this idea will speak to the needs of those who are attending then; I’ll continue to raise the idea from time to time. But for now, it would have been a total flop. I need to stay focused on the present. If I keep meeting the needs of the membership as it is, the changes will come naturally, as the members want them, not on my timetable.”

- ***More about food.*** The role of the meal in increasing meals utilization is complex. It was clear from the study that there are some highly utilized centers where the meals are adequate but could not be described as excellent. Moreover, while every senior we spoke to on our visits to the centers in the study told us the meals at their centers were good, when asked if they would still attend if there were no meals served or if the meals were not that good, the overwhelming majority said yes. These anecdotal data were supported by the anonymous questionnaires that center members completed in Phase 3 of the study. When asked what the most important

reason they came to the center was, less than 20% responded, “For the meal.” The vast majority reported that they attended the center for the companionship, because the center was like home, or to stay active and involved.

What these data tell us is that *seniors will tolerate a wide range in the quality of the meals they eat if the center is meeting their other needs*. If members feel the center is a community where they are welcomed and their needs are recognized, their opinions solicited, they have a say in how the center is run, and they have choices, they will probably eat the meal even if it is only of mediocre quality.

This is not to say that the center directors in the study were not or should not be concerned about the quality of the meals. On the contrary, every director in the study was passionately committed to serving quality meals. Most, however, knew that it is not the most important reason a large majority of their membership attend the center. Nonetheless, as one director summed it up, “It’s not about the food, but if we don’t serve good food we’ll hear about it!”

According to the senior center members we interviewed, for a center to successfully meet its meals utilization goals, the meals served must meet a modest baseline level of quality, tastiness, variety and presentation.¹¹ A center that goes beyond that baseline may marginally increase its meals utilization solely on that basis. However, without a leadership profoundly committed to, and adept at, achieving the mission of community building, even providing extraordinary food will not be sufficient to turn around an underutilized center to full, or greater than full, meals utilization.

- ***What is the impact of programming on meals utilization?*** Increasing the amount or type of center activities (e.g., the arts classes, health screenings, dancing, trips, lectures) is a worthy, perhaps even necessary, goal in its own right. Senior center activities can improve the health, mental health and/or longevity of those who participate in them. However, this study found that center programming as a strategy for increasing meals utilization was less significant than the best practices described in the previous chapter. For the centers investigated in the study, the turnaround in their meals utilization occurred prior to any, or any significant, expansion of their center activities.

That said, rich center programming, like developing strong relationships with the larger community or having the active, positive involvement of the sponsor, quite possibly contributes to *sustaining meals growth over time*. Basing a center’s menu of activities on the expressed desires and needs of its members helps promote the sense of ownership and choice needed to grow the center’s membership. Also, some seniors who might not otherwise consider attending a senior center might be drawn to a particular center activity. If that center’s leadership has built a community where first-timers feel welcomed and at home, some of those seniors will want to be at the center even when the activity that first attracted them is not being offered.

¹¹ What do the successful center directors we spoke with do to ensure this baseline? Among other things, they take a very “hands-on” approach to ensuring the quality of the meals they serve. “You have to go into the kitchen yourself to taste and smell the food. If it doesn’t meet my standards, I know it won’t meet the seniors’,” said one director. “I check the food deliveries from the vendors myself, and I don’t hesitate to send back items that are of poor quality,” said another. Another reported, “We minimize the use of canned food by getting local merchants to donate fresh foods to enhance the quality of the meals.” For other strategies used to ensure baseline meals quality, see our discussion on “Create the right kind of customer service organization” on pages 15 and 16.

- ***When it comes to the physical plant, the only “must-have” is cleanliness.*** Many of the directors and some of the center participants we interviewed were unhappy with the physical environment of their centers. Several complained about being in church basements. Nearly all complained of lacking adequate space to conduct a broad array of programs, or to provide adequate privacy for helping seniors with problems. One center had gone from being underutilized to full utilization in a poorly-lit, hard-to-access basement facility with major damage to its floor. Another turned around its utilization while being relocated three times, once to a large auditorium that it shared with school children. That all of these centers were at or above 100% of meals utilization and/or were able to turn around their meals utilization without, or prior to, renovations indicates that a less-than-ideal physical environment, by itself, is not a deal breaker. However, as with the quality of the meals, there does seem to be a baseline for the condition of the physical environment that must be met if the center and its meals are to be fully utilized. Over and over, seniors told us that their center was clean. In one center, it was only when the new director had done a major cleaning of the “filthy” center she inherited that she was able to turn around her underutilized meals situation. It would seem that cleanliness is a not-so-subtle measure of customer service that the successful center leadership cannot ignore.
- ***Location is not critical to full meals utilization.*** A number of the centers in the study are not ideally located in terms of public transportation. One resides at the top of a steep hill that is icy in the winter months. The fact that all of these centers had 100% or higher meals utilization and were able to turn around their meals utilization, indicates that even a less-than-ideal physical location need not be fatal to a successfully utilized meals program when the critical factors (effective leadership, a focus on community building) are in place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we reiterate the principal findings of our study on factors in the successful utilization of senior center meals:

- It is possible to increase meals utilization—even at seriously underutilized centers faced with difficulties such as poor geographic location, less-than-ideal physical plant and competition from other nearby centers.
- Leadership—particularly by the center director—is central to the successful utilization of a center’s meals.
- To create a successfully utilized senior center, the center leadership must be profoundly committed to, and adept at, creating and maintaining a community for the center members—both current and potential.
- The center’s sponsor plays a crucial role in sustaining center growth over time, in part by establishing high performance standards and monitoring consistently for their achievement.

The Department for the Aging is committed to working as a partner with the directors, staff and sponsors of senior centers to achieve this goal. To that end, the Department offers the following resources:

- Training opportunities on leadership/supervisory skills, creative programming and creating a customer-friendly center are available through the Department’s Center for Organization Development and Training. For information call (212) 442-3015.
- A “Handbook of Practice Suggestions” on implementing the best practices above is included in this report (Appendix E). Further practice suggestions can be contributed and viewed at the DFTA’s website (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta>).
- Technical assistance is available from the Department’s Bureau of Senior Centers (formerly known as the Bureau of Community Services). Center directors may contact their program liaison at Bureau of Senior Centers for more information.
- Research material, links to other agencies for technical assistance, and other useful information can be accessed through our web site (see above).

Appendix A

Agencies Invited to Participate in Phase 1 Focus Groups

Based on FY 2004 Meals Utilization of 100% or More of Projection

- * **Alpha Phi Alpha Senior Center (Harding Dunlap, Director)**
Arc Ft Washington Senior Center
Bay Ridge Center For Older Adults
Boro Park YM-YWHA Senior Center
- * **Boston Secor Senior Center (Sharon Young, Director)**
Carter Burden Luncheon Club
- * **Christopher C. Blenman Senior Center (Claudette Macey, Director)**
- * **City Hall Senior Center (Isabel Ching, Director)**
- * **Council Center For Senior Citizens (Ted Able, Director)**
CPC Queens Nan Shan Senior Citizen Center
- * **CYO Senior Guild Lunch (Monica Cunningham, Director)**
- * **Elmhurst Jackson Heights Senior Center (Maria Cuadrado, Director)**
- * **Encore Luncheon Club (Sr. Lillian McNamara, Director)**
- * **Ft Washington Houses Senior Center (Rebecca Carel, Executive Director)**
- * **Glenridge Senior Citizens Multi-Service Center (Susan Simonetti, Director)**
- * **Good Companions Nutrition (Rachel Sherrow, Director)**
H. Gilroy Senior Center
Hope Gardens Senior Center
- * **IPR HE Corona Senior Center (Debra Perez-Matos, Director)**
John Paul II Friendship Center
- * **Korean American Senior Center of Corona (Kang Soh, Executive Director)**
- * **Korean American Senior Center of Flushing (Kwang Kim, Executive Director)**
Kosher Meals For the Homebound
Krakus Luncheon Club Senior Center
- * **La Guardia Senior Center (David Mei, Director)**
Little Italy Senior Center (now known as Mott Street Senior Center)
Los Sures Senior Center
Manhattanville-Riverside Senior Center
- * **Maria Lawton Senior Center (Viola Andrews, Director)**
Middle Village Older Adult Center
Murray Hill SRO Senior Center
New Lane Senior Center
Peter Cardella Senior Citizen Center
- * **Prospect Hill Senior Services Center (Jane Barry, Executive Director)**
PSS/Davidson Senior Center
- * **RAICES Astoria Senior Center (Marta Alvarado, Director)**
Rain Bailey Avenue Senior Center
Red Hook Senior Center
- * **Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Center (Jeanne Laino, Director)**
Rosetta Gaston Senior Center
S.I. Community Services Friendship Club Senior Center
Shalom Senior Center
South Beach Senior Center
Tilden Senior Center
Times Plaza Senior Center
UBA Beatrice Lewis Senior Center
- * **UJC Adult Luncheon Club (Betsy Jacobson, Director)**
- * **United Hindu Cultural Council Senior Center (Chan Jamoona, Director)**
- * **Washington Heights Community Services Senior Center (David Johnson, Director)**
- * **Willoughby JCC (Brenda Johnson, Director)**
- * **Wyckoff Gardens Senior Center (Maria Clausell, Director)**
Young Israel Of Midwood Senior Center

* Agencies that Participated in Focus Groups

Appendix B

Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

In January 2005, the Commissioner and Department for the Aging (DFTA) Executive Staff asked the Center for Organization Development and Training (ODT) staff to examine eleven additional variables that might impact senior center meals utilization. To assess the impact of these additional eleven variables, ODT staff designed a survey which was administered to two groups of randomly selected and adjusted groups of highly utilized centers and underutilized centers from DFTA Fiscal Year 2004. In addition to the survey questions, the two groups of highly utilized and underutilized centers were compared for Community District location and distribution of poverty population for persons 65+ years of age by Community District. The data and findings for this survey are summarized and detailed below.

Major Findings

In each of the eleven variables, save one, there was no statistical difference between highly utilized and underutilized centers. The lone exception was educational level where the percentage of directors in each group with bachelor level degrees was almost exactly the same but where directors of highly utilized centers were almost twice as likely to have master's level degrees and about half as likely to have no college education.

In addition, the location of a senior center in a Community District with a high level of poverty was *not* a statistically significant indicator of a high level of meals utilization.

Group Data

Two groups of highly utilized (defined as at 100% or above utilization for Fiscal Year 2004) senior centers and underutilized (defined as less than 90% of projected utilization for Fiscal Year 2004) were chosen by random sampling and adjusted to reflect the original distribution by borough and size.

From an initial list of 100 underutilized senior centers, 50 programs were chosen, 47 were surveyed and one was dropped because it was marked as an outlier. This group included nine site directors, one assistant director, and 36 directors. From an initial list of 50 highly utilized senior centers, 24 programs were chosen, 23 were surveyed and one could not be contacted. This group included one site director, two assistant directors and 20 directors.

Programs (Utilization 55% to 90%)			Programs (Utilization 100%+)		
Distribution by Borough and Size*			Distribution by Borough and Size*		
	# Large Programs	# Small Programs		# Large Programs	# Small Programs
Bronx	8	2	Bronx	0	1
Brooklyn	10	2	Brooklyn	5	3
Manhattan	9	2	Manhattan	4	3
Queens	8	3	Queens	5	2
Staten Island	2	0	Staten Island	0	0
Totals	35 (76%)	11 (24%)	Totals	14 (60%)	9 (40%)
Group Total	N=46		Group Total	N=23	

*Size of programs was set at 20,000 planned units/year or above for large programs, and fewer than 20,000 planned units/year for small programs.

Appendix B: Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

Phase 2 Survey Responses By Question

1) Does whether a center's meals are prepared on-site or catered affect its meals utilization?

Both the highly utilized and the underutilized centers are much more likely to prepare their meals on-site than to have them catered. However, the highly utilized centers are *somewhat more likely* to have their meals catered (22%) than are the underutilized centers (13%). For those centers that had their meals catered, the important issue, as it pertained to utilization, seems to be the quality of the catered food and whether it came from a caterer who could provide the type of ethnic cuisine favored by the members of the center (e.g., Indian dishes for the United Hindu Center vs. Swedish meatballs for the predominantly Afro-Caribbean population at the PAL Center in Hollis, Queens).

Phase 2 Survey, Q1: Are your meals prepared on-site or are they catered?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% On-site	87% (n=40)	78% (n=18)
% Catered	13% (n=6)	22% (n=5)

2) How do the facilities at centers with high meals utilization compare with the facilities at centers with underutilization of meals?

To get at this issue, we looked at four variables: 1) had the center undergone a major renovation in the last three years; 2) had the center been repainted in the last two years; 3) is the center located in a basement; 4) is the center handicapped accessible. Here is what we found:

1) The highly utilized centers are no more likely than the underutilized centers to have undergone a recent major renovation. Only 30% of the highly utilized centers had had a major renovation in the last three years, almost exactly the percentage (28%) as the underutilized centers that had undergone a major renovation in the same time period. 2) The highly utilized centers are less likely to have been repainted in the last two years than are the underutilized centers. Only 35% of the highly utilized centers had been repainted in that time period while 50% of the underutilized center had been. 3) The highly utilized centers are somewhat more likely to be located in basements (35%) than are the underutilized centers (22%). 4) The percentage of the highly utilized centers to be handicapped accessible (96%) is only slightly higher than the underutilized centers (91%).

Phase 2 Survey, Q2a: Have you had any major renovations in the last 3 years?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	28% (n=13)	30% (n=7)
% No	72% (n=33)	70% (n=16)

Phase 2 Survey, Q2b: Have you done any repainting in the last 2 years?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	50% (n=23)	35% (n=8)
% No	50% (n=23)	65% (n=15)

Phase 2 Survey, Q2c: Are you located in a basement?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	22% (n=10)	35% (n=8)
% No	78% (n=36)	65% (n=15)

Phase 2 Survey, Q2d: Are you handicapped-accessible?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	91% (n=42)	96% (n=22)
% No	9% (n=6)	4% (n=1)

Appendix B: Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

3) Do the founding members of underutilized centers play a greater role in their centers than do the founding members of a highly utilized center?

To get at the issue of involvement of first generation center members, we posed two questions to the center directors we interviewed: 1) “Do you have first generation members of the center who still attend?”, and 2) “Are these first generation members a dominant influence in the life of the center (e.g., control the selection of center meals, control the selection of center programs/activities, dominate the center’s committees—advisory, menu planning, etc.)?” The results were as follows:

The underutilized centers are more likely to have first generation members still attending the center (78%) than are highly utilized centers (61%). However, it is very unlikely that the first generation members are a dominant influence on the life of the center in either the highly utilized or the underutilized centers. In only 15% of the underutilized centers were the first generation members considered a dominant influence, while in no (0%) highly utilized center do directors report the first generation members are the dominant influence.

Phase 2 Survey, Q3a: Do you have any 1st generation members that attend your center?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	78% (n=36)	61% (n=14)
% No	22% (n=10)	39% (n=9)

Phase 2 Survey, Q3b: Are they a dominant influence?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	15% (n=7)	0% (n=0)
% No	85% (n=39)	100% (n=23)

4) Do centers that are part of a larger organization have greater meals utilization than those that are “stand-alone” organizations?

Both the highly utilized centers and the underutilized centers are more likely to have a sponsor which also sponsors other service organizations (aging and/or other). However, highly utilized centers are somewhat more likely to be “stand-alone” organizations (43%) than are underutilized centers (33%).*

Phase 2 Survey, Q4: Is your sponsoring agency a “stand-alone” organization?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	33% (n=15)	43% (n=10)
% No	67% (n=31)	56% (n=13)

* Data are from the Department for the Aging (DFTA) Intranet listing of community partners and their sponsors. Data are for the same statistically valid and reliable, stratified random sample noted above.

Appendix B: Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

5) Does the percentage of seniors living in poverty in a community affect the meals utilization of the centers in that community?

A definitive answer to this question would be possible only with specific data on the income levels of each center's membership which would allow a comparison of the average and median incomes of those seniors at highly utilized centers and those at underutilized centers. As these data do not currently exist, we compared the poverty rates for the community districts in which both sets of these centers are located.

We found that the median poverty rate for the community districts in which highly utilized centers are located is only slightly higher (19%) than it is for the community districts in which the underutilized centers are located (17.1%). Moreover, as more than half of the highly utilized centers (31 of 51) are located in community districts where there is also one or more underutilized center, there must be factors other than poverty that influence which center a poor senior will attend. Put another way, given a choice of senior centers at which to eat lunch, poor seniors discriminate between centers based on some factor or factors other than their being poor.**

Phase 2 Phase 2, Q5: Community Districts and Percentage Senior Population in Poverty

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
Median Poverty Level	17.1%	19.0%

6) Do highly utilized centers have directors who have been in their positions longer than the directors at underutilized centers?

The directors at the highly utilized centers have been in their positions an average of 7.7 years as compared to 6.7 years for the directors of the underutilized centers. The median number of years the directors of the highly utilized centers had been in their positions is 5.5 years compared to 4.0 years for the directors of the underutilized centers. In addition, 30% of the directors of the underutilized centers have been in their positions two or less years as compared to only 13% of the directors of the highly utilized centers. What these data do not tell us is whether the greater longevity of directors at highly utilized centers is a cause of their having higher meals utilization or a result. It could be that directors of highly utilized centers are more likely to stay in their jobs longer because the success of their programs provides them with greater satisfaction and less stress than the directors of underutilized centers experience.

Phase 2 Survey, Q6: How long have you been a director at this senior center?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
Mean (years)	6.7 years	7.7 years
% 1 year or Less	15% (n=7)	4% (n=1)
% 2 years or Less	30% (n=14)	13% (n=3)

**Data are from the 2004 United States Census which were provided by Jackie Berman, Director of Research for the NYC Department for the Aging. Analysis of the data and comparisons for each group were done by Helen Kwah of the NYC Department for the Aging's Center for Organization Development and Training. All highly utilized and underutilized centers were compared.

Appendix B: Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

- 7) **Are the directors of the highly utilized centers more likely to have been with their organizations prior to becoming the center director than are the directors at the underutilized centers?**

The directors of the highly utilized centers are *slightly more* likely to have worked at their centers prior to becoming director (48%) than are the directors of the underutilized centers (39%).

Phase 2 Survey, Q7: Were you working for the center before becoming a director?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	39% (n=18)	48% (n=11)
% No	61% (n=28)	52% (n=12)

- 8) **Are the directors of the highly utilized centers more likely to have worked with seniors prior to becoming the center director than are the directors at the underutilized centers?**

The directors of the highly utilized centers are *slightly less* likely to have worked with seniors prior to becoming the director of their centers (61%) than are the directors of the underutilized centers (67%).

Phase 2 Survey, Q8: Did you work with seniors before working at this center?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	67% (n=31)	61% (n=14)
% No	33% (n=15)	39% (n=9)

- 9) **How does the educational level of the directors at the highly utilized centers compare to that of the directors of the underutilized centers?**

The percentage of directors of the highly utilized centers with bachelors level degrees is almost exactly the same (43.5%) as the percentage of directors of the underutilized centers (46%). However, directors of the highly utilized centers are *much more likely* to have masters level degrees (43.5%) than are their counterparts at the underutilized centers (24%). Moreover, the percentage of directors of the underutilized centers with no college education is nearly twice that of the directors of the highly utilized centers (17% and 9% respectively).

Phase 2 Survey, Q9: Degree in social work or some related field?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
Masters Level	24% (n=11)	43.5% (n=10)
Bachelors Level	46% (n=21)	43.5% (n=10)
Some College/ Associates Degree	13% (n=6)	4% (n=1)
None	17% (n=8)	9% (n=2)

Appendix B: Phase 2 Findings on Additional Factors Affecting Meals Utilization

10) How does the amount of training the directors of highly utilized centers attend compare with that of the directors of the underutilized centers?

On average, directors of the highly utilized centers attend only *slightly more* days of training per year (5.4 days) than do the directors of the underutilized centers (5.1 days). Training was defined as attendance at any learning experience (e.g., classroom training, in-service training, conferences, workshops, etc.) conducted by DFTA, or other-than-DFTA, professional trainers.

Phase 2 Survey, Q10: What is the average number of days per year you spend in training, workshops or conferences?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
Mean (days)	5.1 days	5.4 days

11) How do the salaries of the directors of highly utilized centers compare with the salaries of the directors of underutilized centers?

The average salary of the directors of highly utilized centers is only *slightly higher* (\$39,785) than the average salary for the directors of the underutilized centers (\$39,074). The reverse is true for the median salaries of the two groups with the directors of the underutilized centers having a *slightly higher* median salary (\$37,594) than the directors of the highly utilized centers (\$37,000).***

Phase 2 Survey, Q11a: Is your DFTA salary as a director supplemented by your sponsor or another funding source?

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
% Yes	24% (n=11)	48% (n=11)
% No	76% (n=35)	52% (n=12)

Phase 2 Survey, Q11b: If it is supplemented, what is the range? (Note: choices given were \$5000 or less, \$5,000 to \$10,000 (which was then averaged in our calculations as \$7500), and \$10,000 or more. If a director stated that the supplement was exactly a certain amount, that amount was used in our calculations instead.)

	Underutilized Programs (n=46)	Highly Utilized Programs (n=23)
Median Pre-supplemented Salaries	\$37,387	\$36,955
Mean Pre-supplemented Salary	\$37,304	\$36,450
Median Final Salaries (including supplements if any)	\$37,594	\$37,000
Mean Final Salaries (including supplements if any)	\$39,074	\$39,785

***Salaries for center directors were obtained by Hulda Ramos, Associate Program Officer in the Department for the Aging’s Bureau of Community Services (BCS), from the contracts of each of the centers in the statistically valid and reliable, stratified random samples noted above. To this “base” salary was added any supplemental salary provided by the center’s sponsor. These supplemental salary data were obtained by BCS and Organization Development and Training staff in their above-mentioned, scripted telephone interviews with center directors.

Appendix C

“Turnaround Stories”: Profiles of Phase 3 Programs and their Directors

Overview

The senior center meals programs and the directors that were the focus of the final phase of the study on critical factors in the successful utilization of senior center meals spanned the five boroughs and included a diverse group of neighborhoods and individuals. They were:

- Carter Burden Luncheon Club (Manhattan) - Marlena Vaccaro, Director
- CYO Senior Guild Luncheon Program (Staten Island) - Monica Cunningham, Director
- Jackie Robinson Senior Center (Manhattan) - Norma Gomez, Director
- M. McLeod Bethune Senior Center (Manhattan) - Yolanda Mayrant, Director
- Ocean Parkway Senior Citizens Center (Brooklyn) - Esther Tashker, Director
- RAICES Astoria Senior Center (Queens) - Marta Alvarado, Director
- RAIN Middletown Senior Center (Bronx) - Patricia McCormack, Director
- UJC Adult Luncheon Club (Manhattan) - Betsy Jacobson, Director

The senior centers had a number of conditions and contexts in common:

- Many were located in facilities that had *not* been renovated at the time of their meals utilization “turnaround.”
- All faced (and continue to face) the realities of changing demographics, limited funding streams, and competition from other meals programs in the neighborhood.
- The turnaround in meals utilization at all the centers happened in a short period of time (i.e., from three to six months).

In addition, the directors of these senior centers shared many common attitudes and traits:

- All had an appreciation and love for working with seniors.
- All shared an attitude of welcoming a challenge; rather than feeling overwhelmed or discouraged by the challenges of the job, these only seemed to further ignite their fierce resolve to succeed.
- All had an intense dedication to making their centers great places to be; they constantly strove towards excellence.
- All shared an openness to getting to know people.
- All had entrepreneurial skills at finding alternative resources where funding was lacking.
- All exhibited a humility and modesty about their work and refused to take an authoritarian attitude towards their staff or the members they served.
- While some were more extroverted or outgoing than others, none were flashy or self-promoting; their ambition was foremost for the growth and success of their centers, not for their own glory or recognition.
- The majority worked at their centers or for the center’s sponsor prior to becoming the center director.
- None had an educational background in aging. Their educational backgrounds were varied (e.g., business, teaching, journalism, administration, theater).

However, despite their shared attitudes and traits, the personalities of all the directors were not identical, disproving the notion that a director who can turn a meals program around must be of a specific personality type.

Appendix C: “Turnaround Stories” - Profiles of Phase 3 Programs and Directors

Furthermore, the success of these “turnaround” programs cannot be linked to an obvious external factor such as the growth of the senior population (adults aged 60+) in the community districts (CDs) in which the centers are located. In fact, all but one of the programs in the final phase of the study were in community districts where there was a decline in the senior population (60+) between 1990 to 2000. Only one (CYO Senior Guild Luncheon Program) is located in a CD where there has been a significant growth in the senior population (see Table 1 below).

The backgrounds of these programs and their directors indicate that there is no extraordinary external circumstance that makes it easier for a particular director to run a highly utilized meals program or some specific personality type that is required to lead a turnaround in center utilization. Rather, it seems these directors share traits common to many people and intuitively exercised strategies (practices) that can be replicated by other senior center directors.

Table 1
Phase 3 Senior Centers by Community District &
Percentage Change in Population of 60+ (1990 and 2000)

Senior Center	Borough/CD #	Population 60+		1990-2000 Population Change	Population Percentage Change
		1990	2000		
	NYC Total	1,278,105	1,252,206	-25,899	-2.0%
	Bronx Total	187,066	180,321	-6,745	-3.6%
RAIN Middletown	CD10	27,754	25,144	-2,610	-9.4%
	Brooklyn Total	382,307	378,172	-4,135	-1.1%
Ocean Parkway	CD15	39,954	36,869	-3,085	-7.7%
	Manhattan Total	264,789	250,463	-14,326	-5.4%
UJC Adult Luncheon Club	CD3	28,844	28,768	-76	-0.3%
Carter Burden Jackie Robinson	CD8	43,560	41,809	-1,751	-4.0%
M. McLeod Bethune	CD9	16,219	14,984	-1,235	-7.6%
	CD12	29,549	28,202	-1,347	-4.6%
	Queens Total	385,772	374,562	-11,210	-2.9%
RAICES Astoria	CD1	33,102	30,844	-2,258	-6.8%
	Staten Island Total	58,171	68,688	10,517	18.1%
Catholic Charities Senior Guild Lunch	CD1	15,460	23,549	8,089	52.3%

Sources:

U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2000 Census of the Population

U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1990 Census of the Population

Appendix C: “Turnaround Stories” - Profiles of Phase 3 Programs and Directors

Carter Burden Luncheon Club

Sponsor: Burden Center for the Aging

Director: Marlena Vaccaro

Summary: Eight years ago, the senior center now known as the Carter Burden Luncheon Club had been significantly underutilized for many years and was otherwise in such poor condition that the Department for the Aging was about to terminate its contract. The floor of the basement-located facility was caving in, the place was windowless and poorly lit, paperwork had not been done for over a year, and the membership consisted of a small group of women who did not welcome anybody new. It was at this point that the Burden Center for the Aging, headed by Executive Director William Dionne, decided to assume the sponsorship of the program and attempt to revive it.

Dionne hired Marlena Vaccaro, who did not have experience working in aging services but who “loved a challenge,” as the center’s director. Vaccaro threw herself into getting new members to attend the center and creating a welcoming environment for them. She made herself available to the membership by moving the director’s office from an isolated location to the center of activity. She replaced the unfriendly volunteer who greeted seniors as they first walked in with someone warm and welcoming. She became involved in the kitchen, learning the business of how meals are prepared and served and made many small changes to improve the service. She recruited old colleagues from her theater days to teach classes and lead programs. But most importantly, Vaccaro brought her energy, enthusiasm and love of the job to the center. Members recognized and resonated with her commitment and passion and spread the word to their friends and neighbors that something exciting and positive was happening at the center.

In addition, Vaccaro and Dionne developed a collaborative and synergistic relationship that has produced many experiments and innovations, not all of which have been successful but all of which have contributed to a sense of excitement at the center. They found ways to tap into a reservoir of volunteers from the civic, professional and educational communities. They have also worked hard to hire the right people as staff and to create an environment that supports them. They learned to look for people who bring a love for seniors and creativity to their jobs, and who are attracted to the sense of camaraderie and family that exists among staff and center members.

Within three months of Vaccaro’s becoming the center’s director, Carter Burden’s meals were at full utilization. And, although the center is now completely renovated and has a state-of-the-art computer facility, all of Carter Burden’s increase in utilization occurred before any renovations were made.

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CYO Senior Guild Luncheon Program

Sponsor: Catholic Charities Community Services - Archdiocese of New York

Director: Monica Cunningham

Summary: Monica Cunningham worked as the assistant director and then director of the CYO Senior Guild Luncheon Club for eight years until her recent departure. When she began working at the center utilization was declining as long-time members were growing frail and finding it difficult to attend. Cunningham faced many challenges to growing the center’s membership: fierce competition from nearby senior centers, being housed in a facility in need of major repairs, vacancies in key positions like the assistant director and custodian, and the presence of a cook who treated older people disdainfully and whose meals were the target of many complaints from the membership.

Nonetheless, Cunningham found ways to increase the center’s utilization. According to her, the chief reason for her success in growing the membership was her availability to and close relationships with the center members (and even their family members) and her willingness and capacity to provide assistance to them when they needed help.

One of Cunningham’s first acts as director was to relocate her desk so that she could greet and interact with established members and welcome new seniors as they entered the center. For Cunningham, knowing the members included learning about their families and inviting family members to special center functions (sometimes in the evenings) where she could develop relationships with them as well. “I wanted the members and their children to think of the center as part of their families,” said Cunningham. “I wanted the families to know they could call me, especially when they lived some distance away, and ask me how their mom or dad was doing.”

Cunningham’s ability to provide assistance to the center members was enhanced by her background doing casework which she put to use in helping the members access all kinds of services and benefits. She used this casework service to attract seniors from the growing Mexican immigrant population in the neighborhood. Once this new population came for help in negotiating the complex system of benefits and services, Cunningham strove to get them to become active members with culturally diverse menus and activities and by using Spanish-speaking members as translators and ambassadors to the immigrant community.

Cunningham also found opportunities to increase participation by studying her community for gaps in service. She identified places in Staten Island where other centers were not sending their buses and had her center’s vans go to those areas to pick up seniors and bring them to her center.

Thanks to Cunningham’s energetic, caring and strategic leadership, the CYO Senior Guild Luncheon Program grew rapidly in utilization during her tenure.

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Jackie Robinson Senior Center

Sponsor: Charles A. Walburg Multi-Service Organization

Director: Norma Gomez

Summary: Eight years ago sponsorship of the Jackie Robinson Senior Center was taken over by Walburg Multi-Service, Inc., an organization that had never previously sponsored a senior center. Meals utilization for most of the next five years was low as numerous directors came and went. However, utilization began to increase slightly in 2003 when a new cook arrived at the center and began getting to know the members and asking for their feedback on the quality of the food and their input on menu planning. A new director, Norma Gomez, was then hired in April 2004. At her job interview Gomez was told that there were many problems at the center and utilization was low, but having a challenge was precisely Gomez’s specialty.

When Gomez arrived at Jackie Robinson, she immediately recognized an ally in the cook and they formed a synergistic partnership in managing the center, sharing information, brainstorming ideas, and filling in for one another when needed. What Gomez and the cook also share is a genuine love for the members, for getting to know them, and for paying attention to “the little things,” such as whether a member has forgotten her cane or whether somebody has come in late for lunch and could use a bowl of soup. Both Gomez and the cook are always looking for ways to do something special at the center. For example, if there is extra flour, the cook will bake whole wheat bread, and on party days when the meals are served restaurant style, they serve a first course of fresh baked bread and salad—making the center feel more like a restaurant.

When Gomez became director, there were numerous administrative issues that needed attending to, but paperwork is something she does after the members leave. When the members are present, particularly during lunch, Gomez can be found among them. The most important thing for her is to spend time with members, listening to them, learning about them, helping them in any way she can, noticing how they are doing and asking for their opinions on how to improve the center.

Promoting cultural diversity is also a critical component to the success of this center located in Harlem. Gomez has done much to foster inclusion and celebrate the diversity of the ethnic groups that attend which in turn has brought new people to the center. She paid particular attention to reaching out to and welcoming the Chinese-American seniors who had once attended the center but had ceased doing so under her predecessors.

Utilization has soared dramatically since Gomez’s start a little over two years ago and shows no signs of slowing.

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M. McLeod Bethune Senior Center

Sponsor: United Block Association (UBA)

Director: Yolanda Mayrant

Summary: Just over two years ago, the Mary McLeod Bethune Senior Center was going from bad to worse with meals utilization steadily dropping and hitting a low of only 40% of capacity in July 2004. It was at this point that a new sponsor, the United Block Association (UBA), headed by Kwame Insaideo, stepped in. The UBA was already the sponsor of several successful senior centers in the area, and Insaideo reassigned a staff person from one of these programs, Yolanda Mayrant, to lead the Bethune center. Within a year utilization had rebounded dramatically to 100%.

Upon arriving at the center, Mayrant observed that the two major ethnic groups using the center, African Americans and Latinos, were physically segregated with the groups eating at separate dining rooms. She quickly ended this practice by turning one of the dining rooms into the “game” room and serving meals in only one room. She coupled this change with a consistent message to the membership that “we are one family here.” She also organized various celebrations to honor different groups’ heritages and activities that would bring members of various groups together. Finally, she identified and recruited a “natural leader” of the Latino membership to join the overall UBA Advisory Council.

Noting also that the center was “incredibly filthy,” when she arrived, Mayrant spent the first few weekends of her own time cleaning the center.

Mayrant keeps an open door to all the center members. Having been raised by an elderly father, Mayrant says she transfers that gratitude and sense of caring to the seniors at the center. For Mayrant, being a director of a senior center is a labor of love.

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Ocean Parkway Senior Center

Sponsor: Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island (JCC)

Director: Esther Tashker

Summary: When the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island (JCC) was asked to become the sponsor for the Ocean Parkway Senior Center in the fall of 2003, the center was substantially underutilized and embroiled in management conflicts. To turn the center around, JCC brought in Esther Tashker, who had been the assistant director at Haber House, a successful senior center also sponsored by JCC.

Tashker summed up her approach to the task of increasing the utilization of the Ocean Parkway center by saying her job was about four very important tasks: building relationships with the center members, building good working relationships with the center staff, maintaining the support of the center sponsor, and repairing the relationship with the center’s landlord. For Tashker, paying attention to and managing each of these relationships was the key to leading the successful turnaround in the center’s utilization.

In the relationship with the center members, Tashker started by asking them what kind of food and activities they wanted. She not only asked them for direction, she carefully observed and analyzed their utilization patterns. For example, she examined meals patterns and found that Friday was the day with the lowest attendance. She asked the members who did not come on Fridays why this was and found they did not like the usual Friday fish menu. Tashker changed it and now Fridays are one of the center’s busiest days.

She also, in her characteristic self-effacing way, expressed her caring and commitment to the members through little touches to the center’s appearance: table cloths, small flower arrangements on the tables, decorations on the walls. These touches, combined with her seeking to learn about the members’ wishes, sent a message of welcome and competence to the members that they shared with friends and neighbors, many of whom had once attended the center but had stopped doing so.

Tashker also demonstrated her commitment to improving the center by immersing herself in the meals preparation. She spent part of every day for the first year working alongside the kitchen staff, learning every aspect of the meals preparation. In this way, she said, she was able to gain the trust and loyalty of the staff and subsequently they were more willing to experiment with changes that improved the quality of the meals.

Tashker’s hands-on, roll-up-her-sleeves approach and hard work did not go unnoticed by the center membership as well as the staff. There are still many improvements Tashker would like to make to Ocean Parkway, but within the first few months of her leadership, membership grew rapidly as word spread about the improving quality of the program and the competence and commitment of its new director.

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RAICES Astoria Senior Center

Sponsor: The Spanish Speaking Elderly Council (RAICES)

Director: Marta Alvarado

Summary: Five years ago the RAICES Astoria Senior Center was struggling. A new director had quit only a year after taking the job, complaining that the members did not want to do anything. The center was in a temporary location in a dark and dingy church basement, and about to be relocated to another temporary and less-than-ideal location in a large and drafty auditorium that was shared with a youth program in the afternoon (meaning members had to vacate shortly after lunch). The center’s meals were (and continue to be) catered with little ability to tailor them to reflect the ethnic preferences of the membership. It was at this point that Marta Alvarado, who was working for RAICES as a caseworker at the time, became the center director.

Alvarado began turning the center around by getting to know each member, taking the time to talk with them, finding out their histories, their stories and their talents. She then created opportunities for members to get to know each other and share their stories with one another. She did this in part by matching members who had common interests and talents (e.g., sewing, art) with one another in groups and activities at the center.

Alvarado also strove to make the center’s diversity—members came to New York from at least sixteen different countries—into one of its great strengths and attractions. She encouraged the celebration of the Independence Days of the members’ many countries of origin, provided every one is celebrated and that the members native to the country being celebrated make a presentation about the art, culture and food of their homeland. Whenever a member returns from a visit to his or her native country, s/he is encouraged to bring pictures and objects and make a presentation to the membership. On days when these celebrations are held, attendance soars. Alvarado also found ways to celebrate the members’ common humanity, such as organizing contests to identify one another’s baby pictures or wedding pictures.

Alvarado also involved the centers’ senior leadership in creating a welcoming environment. She started a practice of having members of the Advisory Council eat at different tables each day to get to know the members and to introduce them to new members.

Alvarado’s efforts, which at their core have the intent of creating a lively and home-like atmosphere, a sense of community and belonging where seniors of all ethnicities and backgrounds feel welcomed and included, made an immediate impact. Within six months of her becoming director, even with the difficulties associated with the temporary locations, the center’s daily meals count had tripled—with little marketing or outreach.

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RAIN Middletown Senior Center

Sponsor: RAIN, Inc.
Director: Patricia McCormack

Summary: The Middletown Senior Center was failing when RAIN, Inc. was asked to assume the sponsorship of the program. Attendance was in serious decline even though the center facility was bright and inviting. In April 2004, RAIN hired Patricia McCormack as the center director. While McCormack had been the director of a well attended senior recreational program, she had never previously overseen a congregate meals program.

McCormack encouraged many members of the recreational program she had directed to attend the Middletown Senior Center and when they did, she took steps to reassure the existing members and to integrate the new ones. She held a general membership meeting at which she affirmed to the existing members that the center still belonged to them while at the same time articulating her commitment to their creating together the kind of center where all seniors would feel welcomed and at home. She backed this message of inclusion up by creating an Advisory Council, which the center had never had, and by constantly soliciting all members’ opinions on menus and programs. A menu committee was created to survey the members preferences before the development of every menu cycle. Moreover, McCormack understood the importance of identifying the natural leaders in the center and recruiting them to serve on the center’s Advisory and other committees.

Perhaps because of her lack of experience running a meals program, McCormack also took care to learn about food preparation. She felt that she could not provide proper supervision to this aspect of the operation until the kitchen staff had taught her the food handling requirements and what it took to get the meals on the table. This commitment to knowing the “business” earned her the respect of both kitchen staff and members.

The cornerstone to McCormack’s success in turning around the center’s utilization is her ability to connect with people and to build a sense of community among the members. McCormack works in a glass-windowed office where she is immediately visible to the members as they walk in. She is available to anyone who wants to talk, greeting each person with genuine warmth. However, she spends much of her time moving about the center talking to members and observing what is going on. If she sees an exclusionary clique developing she moves in quickly to introduce new members and to model and reinforce the welcoming, inclusive culture she is dedicated to fostering. The membership has responded enthusiastically to the attention. In fact, during our site visit, several members went out of their way to inform us that McCormack was the “best director,” and in their customer satisfaction survey responses the top reason given for why they came to the center was because “It feels like home.” This is the major reason why utilization at RAIN Middletown grew 17% in McCormack’s first year as director and continues to grow each year.

Appendix C: “Turnaround Stories” - Profiles of Phase 3 Programs and Directors

UJC Adult Luncheon Club

Sponsor: United Jewish Council of the East Side (UJC)

Director: Betsy Jacobson

Summary: Betsy Jacobson was on the staff of the UJC Adult Luncheon Club in various positions for ten years before becoming its director in 2002. When she became director the program was seriously underutilized. In less than a year of her appointment, the program’s long slide had been reversed: meals utilization was at 100% and the program continues to grow. Jacobson also oversees several satellite centers which are located nearby but in different ethnic communities; they too are growing dramatically in utilization.

Still, there were and continue to be many challenges for Jacobson including demographic changes in the neighborhood which is experiencing both a decline in the total numbers of older people and a growing diversity among the senior population. In addition, her center competes for members with many nearby centers—a remnant of the days when the neighborhood was home to many more seniors. Also, because Jacobson was with the center prior to becoming its director it was difficult for her to promote change with some staff persons who had known her for so long in other capacities and were not used to her being the director. Furthermore, all of the senior center sites Jacobson oversees receive catered and Glatt Kosher meals that are difficult to modify and thereby difficult to sell to the different ethnic groups that now come to UJC’s senior centers.

Nevertheless, Jacobson has been skillful in listening and responding to what her members want. She understood quickly that the old service mentality of “build it and they will come” does not work anymore and that a customer service orientation is a critical component of increasing utilization. As part of a new focus on customer service, Jacobson instituted restaurant-style serving and gave members more choice about their meals. There are now menu alternatives and portion options. For example, when beef is served, there will also be a chicken alternate, and when chicken is the entree, members have a choice of which part of the chicken (drumstick or thigh) they want. Jacobson has also worked hard to improve the staff’s customer-service skills, behaviors and attitudes including conducting in-service trainings on how to serve properly and how to build relationships with members.

Jacobson is also aware that her relationships with members is at the heart of growing the center. Her daily routine is to go from table to table and talk with members: she greets them all by name and keeps track of how they are doing. At the UJC Adult Luncheon Club, the sense of family and community is central. As Jacobson puts it, “The seniors come because we’re family, and we take care of one another.”

Appendix D

Post-Phase 3 Focus Group Participants

Agencies Invited to Participate in May 2006 Focus Group of Directors of Centers Serving Primarily Asian-American Seniors

- * **City Hall Senior Center, Isabel Ching, Director**

- * **CPC Project Open Door, Po Ling Ng, Executive Director**

- CPC Queens Nan Shan Senior Citizen Center**

- * **Korean American Senior Center of Corona, Kwang Kim, Executive Director**

- * **Korean American Senior Center of Flushing, Kwang Kim, Executive Director**

- * **Mott Street Senior Center, Suzanne Yuen, Director**

- * **N.Y. Chinatown Senior Center, Mojing Tran, Director**

- * **Selfhelp Prince Street Senior Center, Jane Qui, Director**

- United Hindu Cultural Council Senior Center**

**Agencies that Participated in the Focus Group*

Appendix E

Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Working* Handbook of Practice Suggestions

This is a working* handbook of practice suggestions for directors and sponsors of senior centers that would like to apply the practices for increasing meals utilization and sustaining growth over time described in Chapters 3 and 4 of this report.

Please note that these are suggestions for applying the practices that accomplish the mission of community building. Keeping this mission in mind, please take the suggestions that make the most sense (given the individual situations of senior centers and individual styles of different directors) and adapt the suggestions as appropriate.



*The suggestions in this handbook have been culled from focus groups and interviews with the directors and sponsors of senior centers (listed in Appendices A, C and D) from September 2004 through May 2006. It is the Department for the Aging's hope that this handbook will become a resource that continues to grow through the on-going contributions of more senior center directors and sponsors.

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Best Practice:

- A place where everybody knows your name: a relationship with each center member is the key to success.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Get Names:** Literally, get to know every member by name.
- ✓ **Speak the Language:** Getting to know members also involves knowing what languages the members speak; at least learn how to say “hello” in their native tongues.
- ✓ **Be “Appropriate”:** Know the cultural and religious norms of the members in order to know how to relate and interact in an appropriate way. For example, depending on their cultural or religious background, members may have differing comfort levels with being touched.
- ✓ **What’s In a Name?** You probably don’t want to refer to your members as “my seniors” or “clients” because those terms can sound patronizing. Call the center participants “members” instead. This term conveys a sense of belonging and that the person is at the center by choice, not because of some infirmity.
- ✓ **Ask Questions:** Find out about their lives by asking them questions. For example, you can ask: “What did you do when you worked?”, “Are you a native New Yorker?” and “Do you have children?”
- ✓ **Involve Staff:** Especially at a larger center, where it may be difficult for a single director to get to know all the members, ensure that other staff members share the responsibility of getting to know members (i.e., try to have each center member feel recognized and known personally by at least one staff person).
- ✓ **Go Table-to-Table:** At least once a week, go from table to table and talk with members.
- ✓ **Position Yourself:** Position yourself centrally as much as you can, whether that means relocating your office or being present where the members eat and/or participate throughout the day.
- ✓ **Call Home:** If for some reason the center has to close, have home phone numbers of the regular members so that you and your staff can call to let the members know not to come in and to see whether the member needs any help.
- ✓ **“Retire” Unwelcoming Volunteers:** Find a way to “retire” volunteers who don’t have a welcoming attitude, and honor them for the contributions they have made. For example, retire them with a plaque acknowledging their years of service.

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

- ✓ **Find Other Work:** If you can’t “retire” a volunteer with an unwelcoming attitude, try to find other things the volunteer can do.
- ✓ **Hire Welcoming Staff:** Make it routine to assess for a welcoming and friendly attitude when hiring new staff, especially for those positions that will require the most contact with members.
- ✓ **Tour and Interview:** Have current members conduct a tour of the center and a “get to know you” interview with new members.
- ✓ **Let Me Introduce You:** Have current members introduce new members at their first membership meeting.
- ✓ **Coffee & Juice All Day:** Raise the funds to offer coffee and/or juice all day, if possible, or set aside a day a week where such refreshments can be offered all day.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- Be present and mindful: observe, assess, and respond.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Let Them See You:** Move your office to a more visible and accessible location in the center, and avoid remote rooms on another floor or in the back where seniors will have a hard time finding you.
- ✓ **Keep Your Door Open:** If you cannot move your office, then keep your door open and move your desk to a position where you can be seen from the door.
- ✓ **Notice Who Is Coming In:** Be observant, notice who is coming in and how they look. Have they lost weight, gotten their hair done, or do they look sad or worried? Also observe how things are going in the center, what is working and what is not, and for opportunities to constantly improve.

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

- ✓ **Notice Who Is NOT Coming In:** Notice if any members have not been around in a while and call (or have staff or volunteers call) them or a family member to find out how they are and if they need any help.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- A friend in need: help center members with their problems or find someone who can.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Develop Partnerships:** Even if you don't have the staff to provide case management, develop partnerships with other community agencies that can, including schools that may be willing to have students do their field placement at your center.
- ✓ **Find Speakers:** If you don't have a caseworker, you can also get someone from a community agency to come in and make a presentation on the services that they offer.
- ✓ **Follow Up:** Always make sure to follow up on the outcome of any issue that you are helping a senior with—especially when you have linked that senior with another agency to receive the assistance.
- ✓ **Have an Emergency Plan in Place:** When the natural emergencies (heat, blizzards, floods, power outages, etc.) occur is not the time to develop a plan. Have one in place to contact your current *and potential* members to make sure they are okay and have what they need to get through the emergency. If they do not, contact emergency service providers or send someone to help. Not only does this protect the potentially vulnerable, but also if you identify seniors in your community who are not attending the center and reach out to them in an emergency they will likely check out your center afterward.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Best Practice:

- Get the right people on your bus (and the wrong people off).

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Loves Working with Seniors:** Look for people who have a love for working with seniors; this is more important than prior experience or degrees.
- ✓ **Right Attitude:** Hire someone who has a customer-friendly attitude, not someone with a “take it or leave it” attitude.
- ✓ **“Retire” Unwelcoming Volunteers:** Find a way to “retire” volunteers that don’t have a welcoming attitude, or move the volunteer into a more suitable position if there is other work the volunteer can do.
- ✓ **Moving Party:** When moving paid or volunteer staff to different positions where their skills or temperament will be more suitable, recognize the work that they’ve already done for the center. Reward them with a certificate for their contributions or have a little celebration to welcome them into their new position.
- ✓ **Rigorous Evaluations:** Be rigorous in performance evaluations, and conduct them regularly.
- ✓ **Professional Development Plan:** Conduct an honest assessment of all staff’s skills and performance, and then determine who needs training, who needs to be moved, who needs coaching, and who needs to be fired. Develop a Professional Development Plan for each person.
- ✓ **Promote From Within When You Can:** Rather than looking for new hires from outside the center, consider promoting someone already on staff (as long as they have the right qualities and skills for the new job) because his/her experience and commitment is already known to you.
- ✓ **Management and Supervisory Skills Training:** Attend program management and supervisory skills trainings such as “Interviewing and Selecting the Right Staff,” and “The Effective Supervisor.”

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Best Practice:

- There are no reserved seats here: create a culture of inclusion/foster relationships between members.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Welcoming Committees:** Establish welcoming committees to greet new seniors and introduce them to existing members.
- ✓ **Stating and Reminding:** Have advisory committee members remind the membership during announcements and at membership meetings that their center is one where new members are welcomed.
- ✓ **Code of Conduct:** Have the advisory committee create a “Code of Conduct” which can be reviewed and approved by the membership in which policies on inclusion and prohibitions on reserved seating are included.
- ✓ **Role Modeling by Senior Leaders:** Charge the advisory committee members with sitting at a different table each day and talking to different people.
- ✓ **Buddy System:** Have existing members volunteer to be buddies to new member for the new member’s first month.
- ✓ **Interests and Talents:** Have a place on the membership application for the senior to record his or her interests and talents. Introduce members with common talents and interests to each other, and have them work together on projects.
- ✓ **Mix It Up:** Once a month, randomly assign lunch seating to encourage new members to meet new people and make new relationships.
- ✓ **Linguistic Inclusion:** Announcements and written materials should be offered in different languages. If the staff can’t serve as translators, reach out to bilingual members who can help with translation.
- ✓ **How Do You Say “Hello?”:** At least learn how to say “hello” in the languages of the non-English speakers at your center.
- ✓ **Celebrate Diversity:** Have special “international day” celebrations with ethnically diverse menus from various ethnic groups and inter-group pool tournaments.
- ✓ **Cultural Competency Training:** All staff can take cultural competency training to better understand their personal biases and attitudes.

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

- ✓ **Know Cultural Norms:** Know the cultural norms of the members in order to know how to relate and interact in an appropriate and culturally sensitive way. For example, depending on their cultural or ethnic background, members may have different comfort levels with being touched.
- ✓ **Food Is A Bridge:** Food is a bridge between cultures. Have members bring in the food of their country to share and talk about their cultures (this can be part of the “international day” celebrations mentioned above).
- ✓ **Let Them Lead:** Have representatives from the various ethnic groups lead in the planning and performance of their native country’s celebrations at the center.
- ✓ **Picture Day:** Have an activity day where members and staff bring pictures of themselves to celebrate their past.
- ✓ **Picture Contests:** Have members and staff bring in their pictures and turn these days into contests, e.g., the “cutest baby picture,” or the “sweetest wedding/couple picture.”
- ✓ **More Contests & Events:** Involve members in planning and staging fun contests or events that give all involved a chance to show off, be creative, and collaborate. Some examples of contests: “Best Legs,” a “Senior Prom,” “Mother’s Day.”
- ✓ **Creating & Telling Histories:** Develop art projects or plays with members that enable them to share their personal histories and stories. Working together on personal projects encourages members to build bonds with each other.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- If you don’t like it, how can I fix it? If you do like it, how can I make it better?: Create the right kind of customer service organization.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Informal Surveys:** Informally survey members at lunchtime, go from table to table and ask seniors what they like and don’t like about the day’s menu.

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

- ✓ **Formal Surveys:** Conduct formal surveys before every new menu cycle and incorporate members’ suggestions in the new menus. Conduct surveys on a regular basis for other aspects of the center, such as the activities.
- ✓ **Membership Committees:** Use membership committees to find out what the membership wants (advisory, menu planning, activities, trips, etc.).
- ✓ **Always Ask for Feedback:** Have all staff (especially the cook and kitchen staff) make a habit of asking for feedback from members about what is working and what could be improved. As the feedback helps the cook improve the match between the food and the members’ tastes, s/he will probably hear a lot more compliments.
- ✓ **Formal Grievance Procedures:** Have a formal procedure for handling grievances and concerns, and set a time frame for grievances to be resolved. For example, guarantee that all grievances will be responded to if not resolved within five days.
- ✓ **Act and Report Back:** Act on suggestions and issues raised. Report back on the actions taken or if the issue could not be resolved, then report back explaining why not. The reporting back should be posted and shared publicly.
- ✓ **Take “Requests” at Monthly Membership Meetings:** Have a regular time at monthly membership meetings for “requests” from members.
- ✓ **Read It Out Loud:** A good time to open the suggestion box and read the items out loud is at the advisory board meetings. Of course, record and follow up on the items as per your center’s procedures.
- ✓ **Bulletin Board:** Try using a bulletin board to acknowledge the grievances or concerns that need follow up and also post the results of how the concerns are resolved.
- ✓ **Newsletter:** Use the center’s newsletter to let the members know how the center responded to issues raised at monthly membership meetings or the suggestion box.
- ✓ **Take It Seriously:** Treat each suggestion, complaint, grievance, or request seriously, no matter how “small” the issue might seem to be. The issue is very important for the member bringing it up.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Best Practice:

- Whose center is it anyway? Involve the membership as partners in leadership.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Natural Born Leaders:** Identify the natural leaders among the membership and recruit these members into formal leadership roles such as positions on the advisory committee.
- ✓ **Bilingual Members as Translators:** Reach out to bilingual members who can help with translation of announcements and written materials for non-English speaking members.
- ✓ **Bilingual Members as Ambassadors:** Bilingual members can help bridge the communication with groups of non-English speaking members. The bilingual member who is willing to facilitate can act as an ambassador helping you and your staff understand the needs of these members.
- ✓ **Get Sophisticated:** Establishing an advisory council is fundamental, but not sufficient. Develop a more sophisticated leadership structure: menu planning committees, travel committees, sunshine committees, etc.
- ✓ **Use the Members Talents and Skills.** Recruit members to teach classes and lead programs in the center using their skills and talents to enrich and expand the center’s activities.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- Meals choice makes a big difference and sends a powerful message.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Start Slowly:** Try offering an alternative choice to the main menu item only once a month, or once a week and on a trial basis. This gives you a chance to work out the logistics and find out which alternative meals are the most feasible and popular.

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- ✓ **Choose at Sign-In:** One way to run the alternative meals program is to ask people to tell you if they want the alternative lunch when they sign in or the day before. This gives the kitchen time to prepare.
- ✓ **Beating the Competition:** Be aware of what neighboring centers are serving on days where you are losing members to the other centers; offer a similar dish as an alternative meal on those days. In other words, if the other center serves chicken on Wednesdays and your center always has a meat dish, offer a chicken alternative on those days such as chicken salad.
- ✓ **Peanut Butter & Jelly:** Try less expensive foods as alternatives that you can offer anytime, such as tuna salad, or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.
- ✓ **Go Lite:** Many times a traditional meal may be too heavy for members. Experiment with offering a few lighter alternatives such as salads or vegetarian substitutes.

Catered Sites:

- ✓ **Know What Other Centers are Serving.** Catered sites, even more so than centers with kitchens, can benefit from knowing what other centers are serving and adding similar dishes as alternatives on those particular days. Just plan ahead in your ordering with the caterer.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- Little things mean a lot: Make it more like a restaurant.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Special Occasions:** Even if you can't serve restaurant-style all the time, do so for parties and special occasions. Serving restaurant-style makes people feel special and celebrated.
- ✓ **Interior Accents:** Add whatever little touches you can to make the dining hall more intimate and like a restaurant, such as table cloths, curtains, flowers on the table, etc.
- ✓ **Multi-course Meals:** If possible, offer a “first course” which can be as simple as salad or soup and a bread basket. This goes a long way in creating a restaurant atmosphere.

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- ✓ **Round Tables & Armed Chairs:** Round tables add much more to a family-style restaurant atmosphere and is more conducive to having conversations. If possible, getting chairs with arms also makes it much easier for senior members to get up from the table.
- ✓ **Rotate Which Table Gets Served First:** Even with restaurant-style, make sure to rotate the serving order for the tables.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Best Practice:

- Run it as if it’s your own business!

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Know Everybody’s Job:** Get to know the jobs that your staff do well enough that you could jump in and do the work yourself if need be. You need to know what the job is like and what skills it requires if you’re going to supervise someone in the job.
- ✓ **Get Certified:** Get a food-handler certificate for working in the kitchen. This will familiarize you with what the kitchen staff need to be doing.
- ✓ **Be An Example & Pitch In:** Pitch in when necessary—you are conveying a sense of team-work and modeling behavior that you want to see in your staff.
- ✓ **Own It.** Ask yourself, “If this were my business and my livelihood depended on it, what would I do differently?” However challenging or unusual the answer, try it. Even if it doesn’t work, the membership will appreciate the effort and the intent and begin to tell their friends that something special is happening.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):

Appendix E: “Working” Handbook of Practice Suggestions for Increasing Meals Utilization

Best Practice:

- No center is an island: Active engagement with the larger community can help sustain growth.

Practice Suggestions:

- ✓ **Don’t be a “Commuter Director”:** Walk around the neighborhood the center is in and see with your own eyes and ears what the challenges are facing the community and where the resources are.
- ✓ **Go to Where the Seniors Are—Don’t Wait for Them to Come to You:** On your walk around the neighborhood, go to where the seniors are (e.g. libraries, parks, McDonalds, etc.) and talk with them. Find out what their challenges and interests are. Ask why they are not coming to your center—what the obstacles are and what you need to do to get them to become members.
- ✓ **Participate:** Attend meetings in the community such as the Interagency Council on Aging, and District Cabinet meeting of the Community Board. Learn what the issues are and get to know other service providers in the community.
- ✓ **Collaborate:** Join forces with local service organizations and other institutions to enhance the center’s services and to ensure cultural competency. Also form coalitions to advocate for services that would make the community more “senior friendly.”
- ✓ **Learn the Community’s Resources:** Learn about the community’s formal and informal resources, and develop relationships with them, e.g., hospitals, libraries, schools, social service providers, religious institutions, etc.

(Write your own suggestion(s) here):