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Establishing A Senior Center

Cooperative Extension Service
Oregon State University

This is one of a series of leaflets based on experience gained in the Lincoln County, Oregon, Community Self-Help Program with Older Adults, along with the study of similar programs in other areas.

Many activities of senior adults are monotonous and not sufficiently challenging to hold their interest. Some of the senior adults are "starved" for new social contacts or for "just something to do." The children of senior adults have established their own homes and also may have left the area. New objects of interest are needed. The goal of a senior adults' center is to provide a place where people can attend or teach classes in any of a wide range of subjects; where they can rest and relax and make new friends. The center also can serve as a referral service for programs relating to health, social security, employment, financial planning, and low-rent housing.

Building Alternatives

Older building. Often an older building, with a good deal of room, is available at a reasonable price and may be centrally located in the town. It might be leased now with an option to buy later. Remember, though, that an older structure may need improvements that could cost more than the building is worth. Also, it may be in an older neighborhood. Be sure that the surrounding area is safe and well-lighted.

New building. If a new building better fits the bill, purchasing the land will be an added consideration. A new building will involve architect's fees, along with the building costs. Often it is difficult to buy land in a central location in a town. To purchase land at a reasonable price the building may need to be some distance from town. Do not overlook the possibility of someone donating the land.

A room in a civic building. Another alternative is to use a room in a civic building. This is one way to get started and see if the idea of a senior center catches on without spending a great sum of money. Check with the local bank, library, museum, or other civic organizations to see if they have any conference or craft rooms available for the group. City or county buildings may also have available space. Consider fairground buildings but keep in mind their distance from town.

Community Center. A fourth alternative is to have a cosponsor for a community center. Young people's groups often need meeting places and one building might work for both groups. Referral services and some classes may be held together. However, some senior adults feel that if youth share their center, they may "take it over" or that will be noisy because of basketball games or other activities.

Sponsoring A Center

Find one person—either paid or volunteer—to represent the senior adults' interests and promote the idea of a center. This "organizer" will be in charge of arranging for the center, enlisting help, arousing and gaining community interest and support, and funding the building.

Recruit an organization or group of organizations with some power and influence to support the center. Some senior adults may already be members of community groups. Go to them first to enlist support for the idea. The groups may include men's and women's service clubs, hospital volunteers, the Boy Scouts, churches, and 4-H and other Extension groups. Find the members who are especially interested in senior adults and invite them to serve on a subcommittee for the center.

This subcommittee will be the decision-making body for the center and will handle all policy and funding decisions. Other community representatives, added later, might be from the local and county government, chamber of commerce, schools and colleges, businesses, and the mass media. Such a cross-section, representing community viewpoints, will go far toward gaining total community support.

Ask the subcommittee members to discuss the idea of a senior center with their groups and colleagues. Write several newspaper articles explaining the ideas and goals of the senior center for release in the local daily and weekly newspapers. Visit community organizations not included on the subcommittee and explain why the center is needed and how it will function as a community service.

Building Selection

Keep in mind the following points in selecting a building for the senior center.

- Is it easily accessible from all areas of the community? Although some seniors drive

their own cars (58 percent in Lincoln County, Oregon, according to a recent survey), many must depend on friends and neighbors to drive them. Or they may take the bus, arrange for a car pool, or even walk. A centrally located center will merit more enthusiasm than one that is accessible to only a few senior citizens.

- Is parking space available? Is the parking lot adequate for the expected number of cars? If there is no parking lot near the building, is there space nearby? Is it free or will the users need to pay?

- Are there many stairs to climb? If possible, the center should be on the main floor of the building. If the second floor is needed for space, be sure there is an elevator. Recreation and class rooms should be reached easily by persons with canes, walkers, or wheel chairs. If the building itself has front steps leading up from the sidewalk, see if a ramp can be added.

- Is the building large enough? At planning stage it may be difficult to judge the number of people interested in the center, but try to estimate how many people will be using it at one time. Many buildings are outgrown before the people move in. Try to gauge how many will be using it ten years from now. Be sure there are adequate rooms for each activity, for meetings, and, perhaps, for a kitchen. See that doorways are wide enough for wheelchairs and walkers.

- Are the utilities adequate? Older people often are cold and need extra warmth. Can the building be heated at a reasonable cost? A cement floor makes the building especially uncomfortable for the feet. Is the lighting sufficient for reading and crafts but not glaring? Is the plumbing adequate for a large number of people? If necessary, what would be the estimated cost of new wiring and light fixtures?

- Is it fire safe, and can older people get out rapidly in case of fire?

Financing A Center

There are several approaches to financing a senior center and one or a combination could be used. Ask several community groups for donations toward the building or its up-keep. In one county the land was donated. A private individual may be willing to donate a building, especially if the seniors group is incorporated or recognized as a non-profit, gift-receiving organization.

Talk over the idea of public financing with the subcommittee. Perhaps taxpayers may vote on a senior center in an up-coming election. Some counties have arranged a public sale of "courtesy deeds" to buy land for a new building. You may wish to visit several organizations and see if one would be willing to spearhead such a fund drive.

The county or city government may appropriate funds for a center. There may be more inclined toward funding a multi-purpose center, serving both senior citizens and youth. The cost will be less to the community for a dual-purpose building.

State or federal agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal and the Federal Housing Administration, may be more receptive to funding just for senior citizens. They feel that a single-purpose center can better fill the senior citizens' unique needs for special programs and services.