2014 Programs of Excellence Awards

February 2015
NISC Senior Center Programming Awards
The National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) Programs of Excellence Awards are designed to honor and promote outstanding efforts made by senior centers throughout the nation to offer innovative, creative, and replicable programs for older adults.

A seven-member NISC Committee selected the award winners from 68 nominations. Six award winners, along with six honorable mentions, were chosen. The top 12 programs are included in this booklet. Each program is proof of the important work that happens at senior centers. A complete listing of the 68 submitted programs is available as a NISC member benefit.

Entries were accepted in the following six categories:

1. **Educational**: Programs designed to educate seniors. Examples may include new and unique classes, technology, legislative, or literary programs.

2. **Expressive & Creative Arts**: Programs related to visual or performing arts.

3. **Fundraising**: Programs designed to generate revenue for the senior center.

4. **Leadership, Civic Engagement, & Community Development**: Programs to increase community involvement and develop strong leaders and volunteers.

5. **Nutrition, Fitness, & Health Promotion**: Programs designed to improve the health of seniors through health-related programs, lectures, and screenings.

6. **Special Events**: Social Programs designed as one-time events, may be inter-generational, musical, artistic, thematic, seasonal, or patriotic events.

This year’s award-winning programming includes ways to engage your participants by highlighting their rich cultural history, improving their computer training skills, exploring innovative visual art projects, and empowering participants to do it themselves and grow their own organic vegetables. You’ll also find centers participating in a national health day, honoring veterans for their service, developing unique partnerships that encourage healthy eating, and enticing a community to run for a worthy cause.

This September during National Senior Center Month, look for your opportunity to be part of the next NISC Programs of Excellence Awards competition and share your best programming idea to inspire others.
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Educational Award Winner

Diversity Program

Gaithersburg Senior Center, Gaithersburg, MD

Our senior center boasts members from all over the world. The Diversity Program was created so people can share their culture and experiences with each other and learn about others. The program discussion topics vary from harvest time in your country, to going to school, to celebrations such as the Indian celebration of Diwali or a Fat Tuesday pancake breakfast to celebrate Mardi Gras.

The discussions last about an hour and are moderated by a staff member. Typically, a small snack related to the discussion topic, like a candy, cookie, or drink, is provided to add to the festive atmosphere of the discussion. For the celebrations, the members provide food from their countries or purchase their own breakfast or lunch. Participants enjoy sharing their experiences growing up, discussing how they have continued their traditions with their families, and learning about the similarities they share with others.

The Diversity Program is a fun and educational way for members from all countries to share. The program encourages the mixing of many different cultures and builds relationships and understanding amongst the members. The program is very easy to organize and it has been interesting to learn how people from the same country, but different regions, have such varied traditions and experiences. The cost and time commitment is minimal, but the building of relationships and better understanding of each other is priceless.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 1

Revenue: 0; Expense: $0 - $20; Net: ($0 - $20)

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The Madison Senior Center offers formal and informal computer training for older adults and it hosts a weekly open computer lab that is staffed by volunteers. A loyal group of eight volunteers rotates the weekly shift. They monitor the room, check for updates on the 12 stations, and answer simple questions. With changing technology, the questions became more involved regarding equipment, software, and social media. There was a need to update the skills of the volunteers so they could adequately assist computer lab users. We hired one of our regular computer instructors to write the manual and teach the class. The four-week class covered basic computer/printer maintenance; Microsoft Office and other software; internet, email, and Facebook; and credit reports, Medicare applications, and online banking and security.

We wrote a local grant to cover the expenses of the instructor and the manuals. Two other senior centers wrote letters of support and we invited their computer volunteers to take the class. Each participant received a manual, as did the participating senior centers, to keep a copy in their lab. The manual (3-ring binder) can be easily upgraded as interests and technology change. A few reluctant volunteers, who thought they knew enough to monitor the lab, admitted in the survey that they were pleasantly surprised at how much they learned! The project was well received by both the volunteers and the participants who benefited from their training.

With the increased focus on technology and senior centers’ needs to reach younger boomers (46-55 years), older boomers (56-64 years), and still serve older participants (an 87-year-old who uses Facebook to see her great-grandchildren), this peer-to-peer computer training program was certainly worth the effort. It was an easy way to improve everyone’s ability to navigate the computer and address individual needs. By advertising the class, we added two more volunteers to our current roster of lab volunteers. They wanted the training!

**Number of Staff/Volunteers Required:** 40 hours included 30 hours of lesson creation, preparation, and actual teaching of the 4-week class (8 hours).

**Revenue:** $1,324 grant + in-kind space and staff time; **Expense:** $1,324 + in-kind space and staff time; **Net:** $0

**Contact:**
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Have you ever had to totally trust someone? This is special art program where each senior teamed up with a partner to create beautiful art through patience and trust. One senior was blindfolded and the other senior provided voice instruction only. The program started by explaining the placement of paint colors, brushes, and the water container. Then, they were instructed to feel their canvas and assess the size of the canvas. The instructor acted as the eyes of the creator by guiding him or her through the process from picking up the paint color to placement on the canvas.

Each senior had 20 minutes to complete their work of art. Although there was some humor to this, as the paint brush sometimes missed the canvas entirely, the program was intended to build trust and patience. Upon completion, the seniors reversed positions, and the process began again so each of them could experience the process from both sides. All of the same paint colors and paint supplies were provided to each person. Even though the same exact supplies were used, the uniqueness and creativity of their final art was remarkable.

As we age, it is difficult to relinquish control and trust to others for our well-being. This exercise caused the seniors to go from a stressful situation of finding the canvas and listening to their fellow senior to relaxing and trusting their fellow senior to guide them through the process of creating one-of-a-kind art piece.

**Number of Staff/Volunteers Required:** 1

**Revenue:** $0; **Expense:** $53; **Net:** ($53)

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Expressive & Creative Arts
Honorable Mention

Wall of Love

Ateaze Senior Center, Baltimore, MD

When you enter the center, you are greeted by the magnificent Wall of Love. Beautiful pictures painted by senior artists adorn both walls in the center’s lobby. The Wall of Love reflects the heart of these senior artists as they express their feelings about their beloved senior center. The 66 paintings decorating the Wall of Love showcase the happiness, sense of family, classes they enjoy, and friendship the seniors have found at the center. The Wall of Love is a great collaboration of our senior center members and staff to create something together that enhances our center.

The wall was constructed from three painting sessions at the center and was free to all members. The only stipulation was to paint something that represents the center to that person. Some members painted their feelings, while other painted activities in the center. The neat thing about the wall is that you can see that the members do care deeply for the center, and even those members who are not as artistic as others are still interested in the way they were hung and displayed. The wall will be here for years to come, and since becoming a big hit, will be expanding to other walls in the center. The Wall was made possible by a partnership with a local business, who generously donated $550 to pay for the canvas, paint, paint brushes, and hanging material. There was no cost to the center or its members.

This program was a free program that will enhance the center for years to come. We took a blank, empty lobby and filled it with warmth and love. Each person that enters is welcomed with the paintings and a smile (literally one painting is a smiley face). Everyone who walks in takes note and can see the center as a warm place to join. It changes the whole atmosphere of that room from cold to colorful. It’s the feeling and emotions that flood you when you look at the paintings. Truly a place you want to be.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 1 staff person

Revenue: $0  Expense: $550 (Donation from local business)  Net: $0

Contact:
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The purpose of this event is to raise money to expand Duxbury Senior Center’s social day program for clients with Alzheimer’s disease. In 2013, our goal was to add a 4th day of service. In 2014, our goal was to start a capital campaign which would allow us to add an addition to our building so that we could double the number of clients we serve. This event will continue annually until our goal is achieved.

In planning, we needed to educate our community about the event. We explained that our program had a waiting list, and we wanted to add an additional day so that we could support families caring for someone with Alzheimer’s disease. We publicized the race in Boston area Running Club newsletters, on Active.com, in local papers, and on cable TV. We asked the community to volunteer at the event. We hoped for 50 runners the first year. We had 125. We planned for 200 runners the second year, and got 250. The race started at 7:30 a.m. It costs $50 and runners love the scenic route along Duxbury’s shores. They felt great supporting a cause that touches almost everyone’s life. They came from near and far. It brought people to the center who had never been there before. They learned about a program that helps families, caregivers, and a person with Alzheimer’s, and it showcased that the Duxbury Senior Center was a place to turn to if you needed help.

Did you know that someone develops Alzheimer’s every 68 seconds? It is the 6th leading cause of death in the U.S. and 5 million Americans are living with the disease. This program supports the person with Alzheimer’s by engaging them in brain activities, exercise, educational program, live music, and field trips. This program provides family members with respite six hours/twice a week (we serve two groups of 10 clients weekly) from the awesome and sometimes overwhelming job of being a caregiver.

**Number of Staff/Volunteers Required:** 50

**Revenue:** $15,688.21; **Expense:** $4,081.09; **Net:** $11,607.12

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The Lamar Senior Activity Center Advisory Board is a 15 member volunteer board and a 501(c)3 organization which supports the programs and operations of the Lamar Senior Activity Center, which is part of the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department. The Advisory Board has conducted a nut selling and pecan cracking fundraiser for approximately 25 years. Different kinds of nuts are sold and pecans are cracked to raise money for center activities and amenities.

The sales and cracking begin in November in order for people to buy all different types of pecans and other nuts for holiday baking and gift giving. The sales end in December, but the cracking continues through January of the next year in order to provide that service as long as pecans are being harvested. The pecan cracking is done by 15 senior volunteers who work 3-5 days per week for 7-8 hours per day. The nut sales are staffed by 25 volunteers per week, who work 4 hour shifts each week day.

The nut sales and pecan cracking contribute funds to the Advisory Board, which in turn sponsors trips and pays for other amenities at the Lamar Senior Activity Center. Because of this fundraiser, patrons of the center enjoy low-priced coffee, copies, luncheons, and Bingo, and discount long-distance trips. In addition, the Advisory Board has purchased computers, tables/chairs, window blinds, and window tinting for the center’s bus. The Senior Activity Center is enjoyed by 700 senior citizens and 30 different senior community groups. The center also offers many classes as well as special events and trips each month.

**Number of Staff/Volunteers Required to run program:** 30 volunteers

**Revenue:** $23,000-$27,000 (annual);  **Expense:** $20,000-$24,000 (annual);  **Net:** $3,000-$7,000 (annual) including $1,500/year for nut cracking

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Leadership, Civic Engagement, & Community Development Award Winner

Urban Farming Partnership with Greensgrow Farm

St. Anne's Senior Community Center, Philadelphia, PA

One of our “non-traditional” community partners is Greensgrow Farm, a nationally recognized leader in urban farming, located across the street from the center. Greensgrow began as a hydroponic farm on land that was an abandoned industrial site. Today, it is a vibrant urban farm providing fresh produce, flowers, and services to the community. The urban farming partnership includes many projects throughout the year. St. Anne’s distributes produce vouchers through the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, providing a service to food insecure seniors. During produce season, Greensgrow brings the farm to St. Anne’s. The seniors redeem their produce vouchers and learn about the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. In exchange, members of St. Anne’s walk to the garden to volunteer with pruning, transplanting, and learning about horticulture. This summer, St. Anne’s drawing class joined the volunteers for “sketching in the garden” at Greensgrow. This was featured in PCA Milestones September publication for innovative center programs. On Earth Day and throughout the year, volunteers from Greensgrow came to St. Anne’s to clean up the grounds and plant flowers to beautify the neighborhood streetscape. Greensgrow donates flower bouquets for special events, provides plants for the lobby area, and provides pumpkins for the center’s annual intergenerational “pumpkin painting party.”

This partnership provides endless possibilities and opportunities for civic engagement, lifelong learning, and improving the longevity, health, and well being of older adults. The plan is to grow and expand the partnership with Greensgrow, increasing opportunities for older adults to volunteer at the farm and in the community, develop year-round programming, and work together to develop a vision and plan to engage the community to revitalize the Cumberland streetscape and surrounding neighborhood.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 4-10 senior volunteers, 1 staff coordinator

Revenue: $0; Expense: $0 Net: $0 (in-kind based on exchange of goods and services)

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Jacksonville Senior Center Veterans Celebration
November 14, 2014

Leadership, Civic Engagement, & Community Development Honorable Mention

Salute Our Veterans

Jacksonville Senior Center, Phoenix, MD

Twenty center members participated in the Salute Our Veterans Program. They represented the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. One female veteran participated. They served in WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Desert Storm. The first part of the event was held at Jacksonville Elementary School in front of 200+ students and faculty. Name badges, which were secured by a U.S. flag pin, were made for each veteran, which included their military photo, their war(s), and military branch. If possible, they also dressed in their uniform. A PowerPoint was shown of their military photos, submitted pictures, ration books, Victory Bulb, WWII Victory newspaper articles, and maps.

The program started with WWII veterans and ended with our Desert Storm veteran. Each veteran briefly discussed their service. Three students from the audience whose fathers were overseas in active military service were introduced, and they spoke about their fathers. Each of these students individually distributed an American flag to veterans of a certain war and then shook their hands. A photograph was taken of these students with the veterans. At the conclusion, the audience shook the veterans' hands. Each student received an American flag. The veterans then returned to our Jacksonville Senior Center, where they received a Citation from Councilman Todd Huff. Each veteran and their guest received a free breakfast and were entertained by a musical band as a salute.

Their military silence was broken after this event. The veterans spoke proudly of their service and their patriotism. The veterans felt appreciated by being recognized, and two veterans told me that they had never been thanked for their service until that day. One Army veteran had liberated the Dachau concentration camp in WWII and saluted the heroes that never came home. The students enjoyed the event so much that they came up and shook hands with the veterans from WWI, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Desert Storm at the program’s conclusion.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 30

Revenue: $0  Expense: $300  Net: ($300) (to pay for veterans' brunch and 4-piece band)

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The Lancaster COA spearheaded a program to raise organic produce for meals, and for participants to take home fresh vegetables. Our garden has become a visual and educational attraction right in our backyard. We began by selecting a site behind our center, in eye sight of our patio. Then, we received donations from a local excavating company, Boucher Construction, who provided stone dust to construct an accessible path to the garden. Volunteers helped spread the materials for the path and the garden’s base. We spread wood chips under the bed and around the perimeter. Then, in conjunction with Minuteman Vocational Trade School, we built 30” high beds with a wide bench/top around the edge for gardeners to sit or lean on (see diagram of plan layout).

Growing Places Garden Project supplied organic loam, seeds, and plants for each bed. Volunteers set up and filled the deep beds, and finally a recycled fence was installed. Seniors entered a lottery to be assigned a bed. They were then partnered with an inexperienced younger garden, if they were already knowledgeable gardeners, and they taught their partner, or we partnered a senior ‘newbie’ with a younger gardener. By the end of the season, we had lots of fresh tomatoes for lunch and to take home. The gardens were the focus for a six-week, twice-a-week healthy cooking series aired on cable paid for by a grant. On Tuesdays, we learned about nutrition and on Fridays, we incorporated our knowledge and produce into meals.

Our intergenerational, accessible garden project targets many problems facing seniors (isolation, poor nutrition, not enough exercise, and limited access) through a low-tech, inexpensive, easily duplicated initiative. It continues to be a catalyst for educational seminars, and other programs too. Gardening gets people moving through passive exercise and increases socialization. Even non-participants admire the gardens and have learned through the nutrition classes, and many able bodied gardeners admire the comfortable high beds.

**Number of Staff/Volunteers Required:** 1 staff began and coordinated the set up, now it is all volunteers. The gardeners really do the work themselves, and reap the rewards! 2 volunteers tops.

**Revenue:** No charge, lots of green! **Expense:** All donated, or grants. Market-value beds and supplies $1,200 for 6; **Net:** $0

**Contact:**  
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The Lake Oswego Adult Community Center, part of the Parks and Recreation Department of the City, launched its first ever 50+ community fitness event. Tying it in with the National Senior Health and Fitness Day allowed planners to incorporate every aspect of wellness dimensions—social, physical, spiritual, vocational, emotional, and intellectual. New participants came to see the center as well as current members looking for new experiences. They could participate in one of the many fitness demos for free to try it out.

In addition to being able to showcase the many services and programs of the senior center, we invited the other divisions of the Parks and Recreation Department, such as the tennis center (message: tennis is a game for life!), golf course (mini indoor golf course), natural areas (70+ hikes and rambles), Luscher Farm (gave away organic lettuce and they also grow food for the center’s Meals on Wheels program), and private practitioners like an acupuncturist, massage therapist, and reiki professional. A local specialty food market had a demo tasting and display on coconut oil and coconut products, fresh smoothies were handmade for participants, and snacks with hummus, kale, and homemade pita bread were served. We used a Passport to Wellness to encourage attendees to visit as many of the offerings as possible. We highlighted evidence-based programs like Tai Chi Moving for Better Balance and Living Well with Chronic Conditions. More than 150 people attended and gained a better understanding of the scope of services available at the center.

Like most senior or adult centers, ours has been challenged to reach out to additional potential users age 55-70. Last fiscal year, 26% of our current users were 85+. We want to honor and serve those participants, while sustaining the center into the future. Since 50+ Fitness is the #3 trend in fitness in the U.S., showcasing how we deliver these services in creative and affordable ways was a great first step via this event. For this fiscal year, there has been an increase of 3% in participants ages 55-69 from last year.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 1 lead program staff and others as needed

Revenue: $0; Expense: prizes: Kindle ($79), advertising ($200), in-kind prizes from department, eg. golf lessons, certificates for classes, etc. Net: ($279)

Contact:
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Special Events Award Winner

Random Acts of Kindness Week

Bykota Senior Center, Towson, MD

Staff learned about the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation and Random Acts of Kindness Week, held February 10-16, 2014, which is popular in schools. We thought it would be fun to bring it to the senior center. It quickly became popular, with activities planned for every day.

The first day, we initiated a Random Acts of Kindness Club and held the first meeting, teaching attendees about the Foundation and how to become a RAKtivist—someone who promotes kindness all year long. On day two, we had kindness quotes and ideas to promote kindness all over the center.

Day three was thank you day where we put post-it notes and valentines out to encourage members to thank or acknowledge each other. Day four was spent making signs for day five, where we planned a street corner kindness rally. We would hold up positive signs saying things like "You Are Awesome" on our busy corner. The rally was canceled due to snow; but we were able to reschedule it when the weather got warmer. It was a great morning. We got many smiles, waves, and honks! During the week, we showed kindness to animals by collecting donations and cash for our local SPCA. We received lots of positive feedback. We saw the members of the Bykota Senior Center enjoying kindness, as well as the employees of the Department of Aging, who share the building with us.

This program was a great pick-me-up in the middle of winter. It brought goodwill and smiles to the center. Everyone was cheered up by signs, cards, and quotes. The street corner kindness rally got commuters to smile—not always a given on a typical morning commute. Members who participated gave examples of where they continued to spread kindness outside the center. If each person made kindness a daily practice, it would change life around us. We like to think that in our little corner of the world, we are off to a good start.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required to run program: 3 staff, 3 volunteers

Revenue: None; Expense: $35 for club meeting refreshments and $30.00 for supplies; Net: ($65)

Contact:
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Special Events Honorable Mention

Technology Boot Camp

Lourie Center, Columbia, SC

As an off-shoot of our Computer-Tutor program, we developed a one-day intensive training for 25 seniors using their own technological devices with 8 volunteer computer engineers from the local Intel Office.

We divided the room with individual tables, each with a tent card stating what the topic would be: internet, cell phone, iPad, laptops, and email. Seniors arrived with their personal devices and went to the table that interested them. The volunteers worked one-on-one or with a small group of seniors, helping with just what they wanted to learn. The seniors were free to go to another table if their questions were answered. The seniors and volunteers then enjoyed a lovely lunch that Intel provided. The conversation continued with the energy level high. Several of the volunteers gave their cards to their new students for follow up questions. Everyone had a great time; the volunteers felt really good about being able to help the seniors and the seniors finally got answers to their questions without having to go through a lengthy course. A local TV station and newspaper ran news stories about the event. The Intel volunteers are planning to hold another Boot Camp in the spring.

This program is worthy of recognition for the following reasons:

1. It brings together volunteers from the corporate world and seniors.
2. It is easy to organize, free to implement.
3. Seniors learn just what they want and need to know so they are not frustrated or overwhelmed, and all the information was relevant and specific to the individual senior.
4. This new competence in technology enhances the individual senior's independence.
5. No other organization offered this type of training.
6. It generated great publicity for the Lourie Center.

Number of Staff/Volunteers Required: 1

Revenue: $0; Expense: $0; Net: $0

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Thank You

Thank you to the following National Institute of Senior Centers Best Practices Team members, who served as judges for the 2014 NISC Programs of Excellence Awards:

- **Ann Adrian**, Center Manager, Lake Oswego Adult Community Center, Lake Oswego, OR
- **Pat Bohse**, Social Community Activities Network (SCAN), Eatontown, NJ
- **Nicole Gorman**, Recreation Supervisor, Rambling River Center, Farmington, MN
- **Susan Gregory**, Director, L. Clark Cushing Heritage Center, Murray, UT
- **Linda Kopping**, Director, Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center, Iowa City, IA
- **Rebecca Kropelnicki**, Marketing & Intergenerational Activities Coordinator, South Washington Senior Center, Cottage Grove, MN

And a big thank you also to **Jill Hall**, Chief, Senior Centers and Community Services Division, Baltimore County Department of Aging, Baltimore, MD, for chairing the Program Awards Committee.