
Good ideas

Expanding experiences during Active Aging Week

by Kori Poplin

With more than 70% of the residents participating in our Fitness for Life program, we have created a culture of active aging at Rappahannock Westminster-Canterbury (RWC), a continuing care retirement community located in Irvington, Virginia. The daily routine for our 200-plus residents includes a variety of fitness classes and wellness activities to engage the mind, body and spirit. Our rural campus, with its mix of buildings linked with walking paths on the edge of a quiet lake, lends itself to active lifestyles.

Ironically, the idyllic location and everyday scheduling at RWC had presented a challenge for us when planning Active Aging Week in the past as our residents are focused on wellness and fitness each and every day. Consequently, during the first three years we hosted annual events to highlight the ICAA Active Aging Week we found residents and community members interested but not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about these special programs. For Active Aging Week 2011, however, we were determined to try a variety of new, different and rewarding opportunities to increase participation and stay true to the theme of expanding your experience.

Goal setting and planning

RWC's planning committee for Active Aging Week consisted of the Wellness Coordinator (me) and Resident Life Coordinator (Amy Lewis). Keeping the committee small allowed us to meet informally and brainstorm ideas before



presenting them to other staff and residents. We then met with our resident activities committee to share the theme of Active Aging Week and to discuss our ideas. The resident committee welcomed our new ideas and was especially interested in the diverse community outreach activities we would be offering.

We decided early in the planning process to modify the national theme for Active Aging Week 2011 from "Expand Your Experience" to "Expand Your Experience and the Experience of Others." I have found that the key to our successful wellness program is building relationships. That includes creative methods of encouraging new residents to walk through the door and helping them to feel at home in our community.

Our specific goals were to provide activities we had never offered before and to increase participation among our residents and the community members. We encouraged the support of the resident committee, which approved all of the programs. They did not proffer any additional activities, but made suggestions about our proposals. They actually felt we were offering too many activities! We knew that not everyone would want to do everything we offered, but total

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participation for each activity was not one of our goals.

One aim was to attract clients. I feel like many of the residents here are my adoptive grandparents. I wondered, How can we get more grandparents to come to RWC? The answer: invite their grandchildren. The Montessori students in our local community take yoga as part of their curriculum. I invited them to co-teach the seated yoga class with me and to invite their grandparents to join us. It was this type of thinking that helped us plan and organize activities to encourage more participation from the broader community of older adults living near us.

When planning, we listed the seven dimensions of wellness—spiritual, physical, intellectual, vocational, environmental, social and emotional—as a guideline for the week and challenged ourselves to offer at least two activities for each dimension, keeping in mind that many activities involve more than one dimension. For example, to address physical wellness, we maintained our resident's current schedule of three to six daily fitness classes but opened them to the community.

We also offered an off-site wellness expedition to a nearby nature park for hiking and paddle boating. For intellectual wellness, we invited the Alzheimer's Association to present Maintain the Brain and the Virginia Hearing Assistance Program to present the newest technology for the hearing impaired. A complete list of activities is on the next page.

Although we are very rural, transportation does not seem to be an issue in our community. A local group, Bay Aging, offers transportation for \$2 per ride, so we did not need to provide transportation. Other communities may need to examine the question of transportation for a successful Active Aging Week.



One resource that proved especially helpful was a Program Profile published in the March-April 2009 issue of Functional U™. “The Busy Bees of Active Aging Week” gave us several good ideas for offering incentives that could improve participation. You’ll see that these were effective.

Budgeting and resources

Active Aging Week did not require a special budget. Most classes, programs and activities required only a commitment of staff time to organize a specific program or activity and be on hand to make sure each event ran smoothly. As a consequence, the only event that required additional funds, provided by the Resident Life department, was the appearance by a professional comedian, for which we paid a discounted rate of \$300.

Learning from past mistakes, we needed to offer a variety of activities that would appeal to everyone; we also were committed to trying something new and placing an emphasis on serving others. To achieve those goals, we offered events that were unique, and we worked with organizations we hadn’t approached before.

We coordinated with the Northern Neck Montessori School in nearby Kilmarnock, Virginia, to arrange for children in their

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Rappahannock Westminister-Canterbury's
2011 Active Aging Week

Expand Your Experience & the Experience of Others

Let the Spirit Move You (Spiritual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hymn sing• Prayer walk led by our Chaplain
Move Your Body (Physical)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fitness for Life classes: strength and balance, yoga, low impact aerobics, water fitness and more• Wellness Expedition to Beaver Dam Nature Park in Gloucester, VA, for hiking and paddle boating• Nature trail walk on-site with Montessori students working on a botany assignment followed by a picnic lunch
Maintain Your Brain (Intellectual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain Your Brain presented by the Alzheimer's Association• Virginia Hearing Assistance program presentation
Do Unto Others (Vocational/Environmental)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seated yoga class taught by 1st-3rd grade Montessori School students• Backpack collection for underprivileged youth• Soles 4 Souls collection throughout the week
Eat, Drink & Be Merry (Social/Emotional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breakfast bingo• "Family Feud" game with residents and staff• Comedy magic show

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program to co-teach our seated yoga class, as well as go on a nature walk while they completed a botany assignment, followed by a picnic lunch.

Using a roster of service organizations in our state, we created a list of possible offerings. We asked The Interfaith Service Council of Lancaster and Northumberland Counties, Virginia, how we could help them serve underprivileged youth. We decided to offer a “backpack drive” to gather backpacks and school supplies for distribution to students in our school district. We asked the residents to purchase new backpacks and if they weren’t able to do so, we shopped for them.

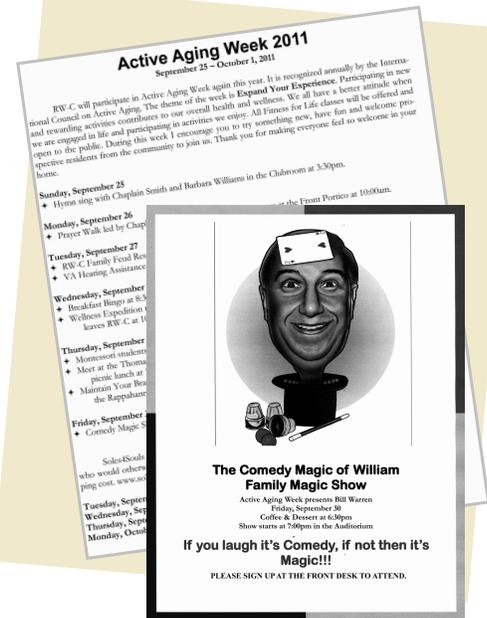
We contacted the Virginia Hearing Assistance Program and the local branch of the Alzheimer’s Association to arrange for speakers during the week.

When looking for an environmental activity, we found Soles 4 Souls, a national organization headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, that collects, cleans and distributes gently used shoes to people in the poorest regions of the world. We had several collection times, with a staff person or a volunteer assisting, and a time scheduled for packing and shipping the shoes.

Having these agencies participate in Active Aging Week was a great help to us and allowed participants to see how these agencies are contributing to the health and well-being of our larger community. We will be partnering with all of the organizations again this year. I am working on the details now.

Encouraging participation

To promote Active Aging Week to residents, we wrote an article for our in-house publication, “The Gazebo Gazette,” and advertised on our in-house television



station. Members of the resident activities committee were encouraged to be the ambassadors of wellness and get the word out to fellow residents to attend and invite a friend from the community at large.

A separate flyer listing all of the weeklong activities was placed in all resident boxes the Monday morning Active Aging Week began, and schedules of events were placed on the dining tables throughout RWC. Announcements were made in each fitness class and during the events themselves.

Because one purpose of Active Aging Week is to welcome and include members of our local community, we prepared and sent out a lengthy press release that described every activity. The release highlighted the events that were new to the schedule and included contact information. We sent the release to the six local newspapers that publish in the region from which we draw most community participation for other programs.

To encourage participation, we handed out raffle tickets to everyone who

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attended each event. Greater participation meant a greater chance for winning one of our prizes. The grand prize was a \$200 reduction in the monthly fee (for RWC residents) or a \$100 gift certificate toward membership in our community fitness program (for participants who did not live at RWC).

Scores of other prizes—guest meal tickets, one hour of concierge services, an hour of housekeeping, gift certificates to our beauty shop for a haircut and style, manicure, pedicure and massage—gave everyone multiple chances to win. As a result, many residents and community members commented that they tried more activities than they normally would and would be more open to trying new programs in the future. The incentives worked!

Event attendance and management

During the week, more than 300 people, mostly independent living and functionally independent assisted living residents, participated in one or more scheduled activities. The children from the local Montessori School, their teachers, parents and grandparents joined in two events specially designed for the older adults and children to interact in both indoor and outdoor activities.

As expected, attendance varied among events, but the two activities organized to focus on intellectual wellness were well attended: 55 people attended the Alzheimer's presentation; 25 came to the program run by the Virginia Hearing Assistance program.

Not surprisingly, 100 turned out for the comedy magic show, an entertaining evening that helped people relax a little and laugh a lot. We never had offered anything like this at RWC so it was very experimental, but the comedian was



recommended (something that is very important). He was wonderful. We will definitely have him back.

All the programs and activities were held on the RWC campus, with the exception of the wellness expedition to the nature park, allowing staff to be present without undue disruption to their daily schedules.

Evaluating effectiveness

We constructed and distributed a survey to participants to gauge their reactions to the events we had planned. They were asked to provide responses in six areas:

- Which activity/program did you enjoy the most? Why?
- Which activity/program did you enjoy the least? Why?
- What activity or program would you like to have offered in the future?
- How can we improve Active Aging Week?
- How can we encourage more community members from outside Rappahannock Westminister-Canterbury to participate?

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- Please list any other comments or suggestions for Active Aging Week.

Using this free-response approach allowed us to gather specific information from attendees about the activities they most (and least) enjoyed. Many provided good reasons for their preferences. We were particularly pleased to receive many frank comments—both positive and negative.

Of course, open-ended questions do not allow one to gauge with any degree of precision how well or how poorly an individual event was received. We received comments about a single activity that ranged from “was well done and should be repeated” to “found it disappointing.” However, a careful perusal of surveys has given us a good sense of what we should repeat and what we might consider dropping in the future.

Several activities met with near-universal approval. Those who participated in the yoga class and the nature walk with children from the Montessori School raved about those activities. We were quite pleased with the response of those who attended the comedy magic show, in which the presenter combined illusions, mind challenges and thought-provoking commentary.

We were also struck by the generosity of our residents in contributing to the local Interfaith Council’s “backpack drive” (84 backpacks) and to the Soles 4 Souls program (111 pairs of shoes were donated and \$131 contributed to pay for shipping them to Nashville for redistribution).

Lessons learned

Using information from the surveys we received from participants in Active Aging Week, and verbal comments gathered from participants and RWC staff, we have been able to make several decisions that

will guide us in planning for Active Aging Week in the future:

- We began planning early enough to design a program that met our objectives.
- We received strong support from RWC staff, making it possible to schedule activities that can be conducted at minimal expense as long as staff has time to prepare programs and incorporate them into the regular schedule.
- The surveys have been particularly helpful in giving us insight into what was successful and what failed either to generate interest or live up to expectations of participants.

As a result of our assessment, in the future we will:

- Continue scheduling activities that address all dimensions of wellness;
- Continue to offer a variety of activities to appeal to the varied interests of RWC residents and seniors in our local community;
- Repeat activities that received high marks (yoga, nature walk with children, community service activities).

Despite our communicating with the residents that the purpose of Active Aging Week is to welcome community members and friends to come to RWC to experience life as they do, relatively few community members participated. Additionally, survey respondents were mixed in their opinions regarding community participation. Some encouraged us to use radio advertising and increase print advertising; others thought we should simply focus on RWC

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residents and staff. More study and thought will be required before we determine how to proceed in the future.

It may be that the goal of encouraging seniors from the community to attend events at RWC will prompt us to continue our outreach efforts. In fact, we have found that opening our community fitness program to the public for a monthly fee has been the best way to attract new residents. We have had five couples move in as a result of their participation. Their involvement allows them to see our community in a whole new light, to connect with the current residents and to dispel any myths of retirement community living.

By far, the most serious criticism we received about Active Aging Week, and the one that will send us back to the drawing board for future programs, is that there were simply too many activities scheduled in a single week.

However, individual activities were generally well received, and many survey respondents suggested that, rather than curtail the program, we should extend it over more than one week. It is highly likely that we will implement this suggestion starting in 2012. By spreading the activities out over time, we believe we will increase participation and have greater impact not only on those who attend but also on the organizations with which we partner.

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Active Aging Week® 2012

September 23-29

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many destinations**

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- Check that the Active Aging Week offerings include more than one dimension of wellness
- Register as a host site at www.icaa.cc/aaw.htm
- Set up a station to administer the Resident Survey for the ICAA/ProMatura Wellness Benchmarks
- Begin your promotion to older adults and your event partners
- Visit the official social media site: www.facebook.com/ActiveAgingWeek

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