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Pennsylvania Senior Centers in Jeopardy

By: [Cristina Rouvalis](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | October 1, 2009



Eugene Richards, 74, lifts weights during an exercise class at the Vintage Senior Community Center in Pittsburgh. Pennsylvania has more than 500 senior centers that provide classes, meals and camaraderie. Photo by Scott Goldsmith/Aurora Select

Summary:

- *Senior center supporters want \$30 million more.*
- *State ranks third in percentage of people over 65.*
- *Centers struggling to broaden appeal to boomers.*

At 74, Eugene Richards felt his world shrinking. He had gone to the funerals of his oldest and dearest friends. His back ached, his joints were sore, and some days he would just sit in bed and watch TV.

The retired teacher and former dancer tried working out at a gym but felt out of place. "I was looking at yards and yards of spandex on attractive young women and looked at my body in the mirror and said, 'Oh my God.'"

So Richards joined an exercise class at [Vintage Senior Community Center](#) in Pittsburgh. After stretching and strengthening exercises, he often stays for lunch or to use the computer to catch up on news. Sometimes he joins a field trip to an amusement park or a musical. "This felt like home right away," he said, "and it keeps me moving."



Teri Bridgett began visiting the Vintage Senior Commur went on disability after hip and knee replacement surge at the center leading chronic disease management clas:

Photo by Scott Goldsmith/Aurora Select

For many older Pennsylvanians, the local senior center is more than just a place to eat a hot meal and play pinochle. Centers such as Vintage are social hubs with treadmills, watercolor classes and other activities that keep people engaged and living at home longer. They can sign up for programs to learn about chronic disease management, massage therapy and brain health.

But many of the more than 500 senior centers and 100 satellite meal centers are deteriorating from flat state funding, said Ray Landis, advocacy manager for [AARP Pennsylvania](#). A few centers have closed in York, Greene, Clinton and Lycoming counties, and others have cut hours. Many need to replace leaky roofs or make other building repairs. "It's definitely a crisis," Landis said.

Many centers were created in closed schools and factories in the 1960s and '70s and are now showing signs of wear. They cannot afford to repair worn-out floors, faulty plumbing and broken kitchen equipment. In 2007, the state granted \$4 million to revitalize them, satisfying just a quarter of the need.

Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation in percentage of residents over age 65. In 2007-08, the state Department of Aging gave \$24 million to senior centers. An additional \$23.7 million was allotted for group meals for older people.

The [Senior Support Coalition](#), including AARP, is asking legislators to tap \$30 million of an estimated \$200 million in lottery reserves and encouraging people to sign an online petition to reinforce the message. Lynn Fields Harris, president of the [Pennsylvania Association of Senior Centers](#), said TV ads featuring lottery mascot Gus the groundhog are misleading.

"You have Gus—the second most famous groundhog in Pennsylvania—on TV daily saying that the lottery is funding senior programs. It gives the impression that senior centers are flush," said Harris. "But they aren't, because a very small percentage of those funds are allocated to senior center programs."

Senior centers are also facing pressure to reinvent themselves to entice both retiring boomers and older generations with sharply different interests. Ray Prushnok, [Department of Aging](#) deputy secretary, said some centers are thriving by adding cafe-style lunches and yoga classes that appeal to younger members.

AARP's Landis called it a Catch-22. "You need to change to grow and attract younger people. But if you don't have money, how are you going to change?"

Senior centers also have to combat lingering stereotypes.

"Some people are opposed to the idea of going to a senior center," Richards said. "They think it means you are giving up to old age. It's absolutely not that way. It gives support to people who are alone in their homes."

[A county-by-county list of senior centers](#) is available.

Cristina Rouvalis is a writer based in Pittsburgh.