

# Senior Recreation Services

## Social, physical well-being benefits of senior centers

By Diane Cyphers

**N**ancy Cornelius, 78, lives alone, but the Cranberry Township resident is anything but lonely.

"We first came to the senior center as new residents to meet people in our area. Now my husband has passed away, and these people at the center are my circle of friends," says Cornelius, a member of the Cranberry Township Senior Center operated by the Lutheran Service Society.

Cornelius says attending the senior center allows her to get out and participate in activities and talk with interesting people. She participates in the morning exercise class and helps prepare for lunch. "I often eat the afternoon meal here because I like having the company."

Cornelius may be on to something. Research shows that socializing extends your life. A recent study in the *Annals of*

*Internal Medicine* reported that strong social contacts provide powerful protection against the mental declines that often go along with aging. And that those who have strong friendships can add years to their life.

Visiting and engaging in activities with friends and family has long been associated with improving mood and lifting spirits. But research now suggests that socializing may provide additional benefits by improving cognition and preventing mental decline.

"It sure beats sitting at home and watching the tube," says Tom Berkebile, 72, who attends senior center programs in Butler County along with his wife, Carol. "There are so many activities like yoga, health seminars, line dancing, bingo and crafts. The people are always friendly and welcoming. And you can be as involved as you want to be."

Tom says he particularly enjoys being with his peers, and having discussions with people of his own generation.

Loneliness is difficult at any age. For seniors, a lack of social contact may even be hazardous to their health. Isolation can lead seniors to succumb to depression, a condition that makes the vulnerable to many illnesses, including heart disease, alcoholism, diabetes and more. In a 13-year study of 3,000 senior citizens published in 1999, Harvard researchers reported that social activities such as attending church, clubs and playing bingo were as equally important to healthy aging as regular exercise.

"I've done volunteer work in the pas



Mary Hayes, 81, is active both in her home and at the senior center in her Brighton Heights neighborhood.

but it doesn't always get you what you need in terms of friends and fun," says Mary Hayes, 81. That's why she regularly attends the Brighton Heights Senior Center in Allegheny County. Hayes is also an elected member serving as president of the center's advisory council and helps to develop programs that meet the needs and interests of those who attend.

Hayes says people at the center exercise, play pool, cards and bingo, as well as take trips for shopping, concerts, tours and movies. She especially likes the group games they play -- Jeopardy, Family Feud and Pictionary. They have learned important information at presentations about ways to help lower utility bills, keep their homes safe, prevent getting scammed, and cooking classes featuring healthy ways to cook for one.

"It's good to meet new people, learn new things, and have a little fun," says Hayes. She encourages anyone over 60 to take advantage of the many activities and programs offered at senior centers.



Attendees of the Cranberry Township Senior Center participate in an exercise class.

"I enjoy being involved and get the benefits of close friendships, group activities and having fun together."

Overwhelmingly, research findings show that seniors who engage in activities develop new skills, feel more healthy and self-fulfilled, have reduced stress, and more energy and fun. Seniors who have a strong social network feel more connected, relate better to others, have more self-confidence and show improved assertiveness and decisiveness.

"It's a lively and active atmosphere here," says Laurie Hilton who manages the Cranberry Senior Center for the Lutheran Service Society. "We offer a safe environment for older adults to come

and meet new people. I enjoy the camaraderie, and it makes me feel good to serve a healthy meal. There is a wide variety of activities, programs and health and wellness seminars. Parties and bingo are popular events, and our upcoming flu shot clinic is always well attended."

Pennsylvania counties offer senior center programs in many locations. Check with your

county's Area Agency on Aging (online at [www.aging.state.pa.us](http://www.aging.state.pa.us)) for specific center locations in your area.

Enrollment is open to all residents age 60 and over. Programs and center activities are free with enrollment and a nominal donation is requested for meals. Some centers offer transportation. Tours and excursions planned by the center usually have an associated fee.

It's important for seniors and caregivers to find ways to prevent isolation. Discovering and fostering avenues to help older adults remain engaged in productive and enjoyable activities is an important component of successful aging. **CG**

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