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## Volunteers: The Key to Expanding Extension Programming for Older Adults

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PREVIOUS  
ARTICLE



ISSUE  
CONTENTS



NEXT  
ARTICLE

## Volunteers: The Key to Expanding Extension Programming for Older Adults

### Abstract

With the rapid growth of the nation's aging population, Extension is trying to provide useful programming for seniors. Like many other Extension programs, older adult wellness education is expanding through the use of volunteer instructors. For the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Seniors CAN program, these volunteers come primarily from two groups: peer-educators who are over 55 years of age, including those from diverse populations, and the staff of agencies that already provide services to elderly clients. The inclusion of these volunteer instructors has the benefit of bringing Extension programming to a much larger and more diverse aging audience.

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### Introduction

The U.S. Census (2002) estimates that one out of every five people in the United States is 55 years of age or older. With this rapid growth of the nation's aging population, Extension is trying to provide useful programming for seniors.

The Seniors CAN program was developed by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) to help older adults maintain their independent living status (Collins & Hernandez, 2000). The 16-week wellness program has demonstrated that community-based education can be an effective tool to improve older adults' quality of life by enhancing their knowledge of everyday issues ranging from nutrition to crime prevention (Collins, 2001).

It was determined that in order for the program to reach its largest audience both locally and nationally, a considerable expansion of instructors needed to occur. Other programs such as 4-H and Master Gardeners serve as successful growth models regarding the use of volunteers. For Seniors CAN, this has been accomplished with volunteers from two groups: peer-educators from the target audience over 55 years of age and volunteers from the staffs of agencies that already provide services to elderly clients.

By mid-2003, more than 271 older adults completed the 4-month Seniors CAN program in urban and rural Clark County. Another 150 attended from 1 to 15 sessions of the program without completing the in- and out-processing documents. Seniors CAN has been presented at 31 local sites, with one-third of the 16-week sessions taught by volunteer instructors. The "Seniors CAN Curriculum" is currently being utilized in more than 35 states and was listed on the Centers for Disease Control, Health Promotion and Education Database in 2002.

### Expanding Program Delivery with Volunteer Instructors

#### Peer Educators

Initial attempts to expand the scope of delivery of the Seniors CAN program targeted older adult volunteer instructors. Existing research suggests that volunteering may help improve the physical and psychological well-being of seniors by maintaining self-esteem, life satisfaction, access to support systems, and activity level, (Van Willigen, 2000; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999). The

research also suggests that senior volunteers will provide their assistance to organizations that are more likely to affect their well-being. Recruitment of senior peer-educators has been helped by the program's affiliation with the University of Nevada, Reno, and they enjoy having access to the latest research provided directly by Cooperative Extension faculty and staff. Seniors CAN students who have completed the course have also been recruited as future peer-educators.

### **Minority Volunteers**

Another program expansion issue that can be addressed with volunteers is the need for representatives from ethnic minorities as peer-educators. Community centers often serve specific ethnic groups that might not otherwise have access to extension programs. Recruiting volunteers from within these ethnic groups can help the program reach more diverse populations.

One excellent example of this is a bilingual volunteer Seniors CAN instructor who was recruited from a community center in a predominantly Spanish-speaking area of Las Vegas. Although the former engineer's background is not in teaching, he enthusiastically assumed the role of peer-instructor. At 79 years old, he volunteers for a number of organizations and travels by bus, demonstrating a practical solution to transportation issues for older adult volunteers who do not drive.

### **Human Service Agency Staff**

As the process of recruiting volunteer instructors for Seniors CAN has evolved, another source has emerged: the paid staff of social service agencies providing services to the elderly. Many such organizations have requirements to provide health and wellness related educational programming for older adults. The Seniors CAN program is using this option through its collaboration with two such organizations: the Las Vegas Housing Authority (LVHA) and Nevada Hand.

The LVHA requested the university provide the course for residents of their older adult subsidized housing sites. Because the scope was too large for the limited staff of the Seniors CAN program, Housing Authority employees were trained to teach the program, utilizing the train-the-trainer model. In 2002, five employees taught the Seniors CAN program at multiple sites, providing hundreds of hours of wellness instruction.

At the same time, Nevada Hand, a non-profit organization that builds and operates senior low-income complexes in Las Vegas, was searching for a way to provide wellness education for elderly residents. Seven of their residential managers were trained, and four have taught the Seniors CAN program, reaching a large audience in low-income housing.

Multiple benefits come from training paid staff of other organizations teach an extension program. These include:

- Making the program available to the numerous agencies serving senior populations,
- Broadening the teaching capacity of these instructors for other educational opportunities, and
- Providing access to underserved populations for extension programming.

### **Training & Supervising Volunteers**

Once instructors have been recruited, adequate training and supervision of lesson delivery becomes critical in ensuring that the wellness education program continues to meet its objectives. The Seniors CAN program has two approaches to provide training and support:

1. An instructor's training class that provides program content and assistance in facilitation techniques, and
2. On-going support for the instructor.

The train-the-trainer model is used for the instructor's training class. Volunteers are given basic training in teaching skills for conducting and facilitating an interactive class. The volunteer instructors also observe a regularly scheduled class session taught by Cooperative Extension staff or another trained volunteer instructor.

On-going instructor support provides both confidence-building and assistance in dealing with the myriad questions that arise from instruction with such relevance to everyday life. University of Nevada Cooperative Extension resources, such as nutrition professionals and aging researchers, provide answers to program-related questions. The individual confidence-building is addressed by having UNCE staff attend the first few classes to provide moral support. The Seniors CAN program provides supervision, printed lesson handouts, and program-related materials.

### **Conclusions**

Just as with other Extension programming, volunteers can help expand delivery of programs designed for the older adult population. The UNCE Seniors CAN program has successfully utilized two recruiting pools: peer-educators over the age of 55 and staff from social service organizations. Train-the-trainer instruction and continuing support with Extension resources are crucial to the retention of such instructors.

The Seniors CAN program has taken a number of critical steps in development during its first 5 years. Finding and retaining effective and reliable volunteer instructors complements the expansion of this program to provide wellness education to the large and rapidly growing older adult population.

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