

City of Rogers, Arkansas

Eyesore Transformed Into a Thriving Wellness Center

On what was once a hardscrabble area of Rogers, a town of nearly 50,000 in northwest Arkansas, there now sits a flourishing Adult Wellness Center (AWC) that provides physical and social opportunities for adults age 50 and older. Each month the center offers more than 30 physical activity classes and 50 mental and social activities. Between 750 and 1,400 older adults come to the center daily for organized group programs and to independently workout, walk, swim, or play competitive recreational sports.

The AWC was awarded the Environmental Protection Agency's 2007 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging. The center has also received the 2008 NuStep Pinnacle Award for excellence in older adult wellness programs and the Arkansas Recreation & Parks Association Facility of the Year.

In 2004 the city of Rogers obtained 20.5 acres of land for the AWC, about half of which was purchased and half donated. Some of the property was subsequently given to the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) for senior housing. Sidewalks were designed to connect the AWC and housing area, making accessibility easy for residents.

Keri Wilkinson, director the center, explains that the facility was specifically designed for the city's increasing aging population. When the center was being planned, consideration was given to locate it within walking distance of amenities. In addition to being situated near the AAA's low-income senior housing complex, it is also near several medical clinics, independent and assisted living communities, a library, grocery store and shopping mall. A number of non-profit agencies and healthcare facilities will soon also be located near the AWC.

Today the AWC neighborhood is an inviting and walkable smart growth area. Future plans for the neighborhood include a 72-unit mixed-income housing complex.

"The center's programming is designed to appeal to both the traditional senior population," said Wilkinson, "As well as the interests of the growing baby boomer population that is anything but typical." She notes that 29 percent of the city's population is over age 45, and 38 percent of the population of Belton County (where Rogers is located) is over age 45.

The AWC features a warm water therapy pool; an activity pool; a state-of-the-art fitness center with cardiovascular and strength training equipment; a full-size gymnasium; a library with computer lab; an arts and crafts studio; a demonstration kitchen; and multiple meeting, social, and educational rooms. The center is fully wheelchair accessible and to accommodate members who need assistance, both swimming pools offer handicap accessible lifts. Handicap shower/changing stalls and caregiver bathrooms are available. Special listening devices are also available for those with hearing impairments.

"We are giving people a place to thrive and every person who walks in the door has a story to tell," says Wilkinson. One example is sixty-nine-year-old Ruby. Diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 2004, Ruby had difficulty with everyday activities and required extensive care from her husband. In 2006 she joined the AWC and began using the warm-water therapy pool. When she started coming to the center Ruby was unable to walk across the pool unassisted. But with encouragement from others and an indomitable "I can do it spirit" she succeeded with that goal. Over the next four months she increased her workouts, eventually being able to spend three to four hours in the pool at a stretch. As a result her efforts, Ruby eventually gave up her wheelchair and her husband was able to return to work. "Thank God and whoever gave us this facility," exclaims this gutsy lady who has become a role model for both AWC members and staff.

Another aspect of the AWC is a wellness garden. It is handicap-accessible and has a rubberized walking trail that enables access to nearby strengthening and stretching Life Trails exercise equipment. There is also a water garden, a demonstration garden with raised planting beds, a labyrinth, a four-season's garden designed by the AWC members, a gazebo and lawn panel for recreation activities, outdoor concerts, classes, and socials, a picnic area, a bird-watching area, and several spots to sit and enjoy nature. There is also a trail that leads from the garden and connects to senior housing.

“What has been most exciting about the AWC is seeing the sheer number of people we are able to reach. Many People are now exercising first time in their life,” said Wilkinson. “They are not afraid, they are not intimidated, and they are taking control of their health.”

She notes that the fitness side of facility is seeing more use than the side designed for more sedentary activities. Center members receive free fitness orientations and area exercise-physiology students are available to assist individuals. The center focuses on a range of activities and encourages people to try different things. “We constantly change what we offer. There is a new activities calendar each month featuring new classes and new interest groups.”

When the center first opened, Wilkinson comments they were challenged by the logistics of handling the large immediate influx of members. “We had a lot of issues to address including how to deal with a large number of people using the center at the same time, teaching fitness center etiquette, expanding the computer lab, and adding swimming classes. We realized because of the wide age-range we were targeting we were dealing with a broad range of ability levels to accommodate.”

Safety became another challenge. Policies were put in place to require footwear in the pool area and adding rough floor strips to help prevent falls.

Commenting on advice that she would offer other communities interested in establishing a facility similar to the AWC, Wilkinson stressed the importance of getting input from seniors. “Plan big □ There are so many needs to be met for the growing aging population. Find out what seniors want. Get support from area senior groups. Listen to both older adults and healthcare professionals who work with older adults. Find out what others have been successful at and what has failed. Make sure you have a solid fitness component. And hire good staff.”

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About the Award

2007 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

The award honors the communities that are planning for, and beginning to use, smart growth and active aging. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity. Active aging is supported by safe, walkable environments. Smart growth strives to minimize the impact of the built environment on both human health and the natural environment by integrating environmental considerations into development patterns. Using smart growth, communities create attractive, walkable neighborhoods that give people of all ages, income levels, and physical abilities a range of safe, affordable and convenient choices in where to live and how to get around.

For additional information, please visit the EPA's Aging Initiative Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/index.htm>.