

NORTH HARRIS COLLEGE

A NORTH HARRIS MONTGOMERY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CORPORATE AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

AGING TEXAS WELL

June 2003

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GOALS OF THE AGING TEXAS WELL GRANT

The Aging Texas Well Community Preparedness Grant* was awarded to North Harris College in June 2002 and had five goals:

1. Assess the aging support systems for residents age 55 and older;
2. Identify gaps in the aging support systems;
3. Increase awareness of the value of 55+ residents and spotlight their achievements and contributions;
4. Identify policies, programs and activities that could close the gaps in the aging support systems;
5. Encourage collaborative, societal initiatives that further the quality of life for 55+ residents

*(area of study was exclusively North Harris County)

THE AGING TEXAS WELL COALITION



Coalition members (l to r): Charla Hannibal, Charlotte Mangum, Betty Anne Sullivan-Szuts, Carol Pauze, Barbara Thomason, Sue Sharp, (not shown are Charlene Hunter James, Katherine Miller, Ruth Ann Shepherd, and Vicky Wysocki).

The Aging Texas Well Coalition met quarterly to provide leadership for the Aging Texas Well Grant. These leaders represented agencies and programs which are important for the quality of life of 55+ residents.

Serving on the ATW Coalition are: Barbara Thomason, Dean of Corporate and Continuing Education at North Harris College; Charlotte Mangum, Director of Precinct 4 Community Centers and the Senior Adult Program; Charlene James, Director of the Area Agency On Aging; Charla Hannibal, Coordinator of the Sixty Plus Senior Program at Northwest Assistance Ministries; Carol Pauze, Geriatric Consultant for Aging-In-Place; Katherine Miller, Vice President of Tomball College Continuing Education and Workforce Development; Sue Sharp, Faculty, North Harris College Department of Kinesiology; Vicky Wysocki, Grant Manager, Sixty Plus Program, Northwest Assistance Ministries; and Betty Anne Sullivan-Szuts, Grant Coordinator. The Coalition will continue to meet after the close of the grant to focus on housing and education issues for older citizens in North Harris County.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Aging Texas Well Coalition invited community leaders to attend a Community Focus Group at Northwest Assistance Ministries to assist in determining the direction the research would take. The participants discussed the following nine quality of life measures: cultural events, education, employment and volunteer opportunities, financial and legal services, healthcare and human services, housing, physical fitness programs, social life and transportation.

AGING TEXAS WELL COMMUNITY SURVEY

The Aging Texas Well Coalition reviewed the information gathered from the community focus group and collaborated on the development of a four-page survey, which was used to evaluate the access that 55+ residents have to aging support systems. The ATW survey was mailed to a list of economically and ethnically diverse 55+ residents in the North Harris County area targeted by the grant.

DIVERSE COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUPS

The community focus groups representing a cross section of 55+ residents were invited to meetings where the purpose of the research was explained and where they had an opportunity to complete the Aging Texas Well survey. The focus groups included individuals from Doss Community Center, Golden Gathering, Meals on Wheels, Sixty Plus Senior Program, Northwoods Senior Women's Discovery Group, Pinemont Apartments, Villas In The Pines, and the Chronically Ill Group.

ABOUT THE AGING TEXAS WELL GRANT COORDINATOR

Betty Anne Sullivan-Szuts, Ed.D. directed the gerontology program at Union County College in Cranford, New Jersey where she taught the *Sociology of Aging* and the *Psychology of Aging*. While a visiting professor at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, she taught *Aging in America*. Betty Anne is a certified Sageing™ Seminar leader for the Spiritual Eldering Institute in Boulder, Colorado. She wrote the first leader's training curriculum and has been leading seminars for the past ten years. She is the author of *Spiritual Elders: Women of Worth in the Third Millennium*. She was the Director of the Suffolk County Respite Care Program in Suffolk County, New York where, as a visiting professor, she taught *Health and Aging* to graduate students in the Gerontology Program at Long Island University. Her career as an educator spans forty years and her previous positions include high school teacher, vice principal, college administrator and New Jersey state supervisor of education.



Community leaders gathered at Northwest Assistance Ministries to focus on the nine quality of life issues for older adults in this region.



Connie Meyer, Gene Meyer, and Janice Leslie participate in the Community Leaders Focus Group.



Betty-Anne Sullivan-Szuts launches the first focus group.

THE STATUS OF AGING SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN NORTH HARRIS COUNTY

Based on the data that was collected on the nine quality of life measures surveyed by the ATW grant, the Coalition reports the following significant findings and recommendations. Overall, the Coalition concluded that our older citizens have access to most quality of life factors, however, there is an underlying anxiety that access and services will slip away. This anxiety is a result of concern for an economy that erodes one's purchasing power for essentials such as prescriptions, rent/housing, food and transportation as well as a concern about one's own ability to maintain health and independence over time. These underlying concerns suggest that our community take a proactive approach to continued study and action on behalf of older adults and their needs.

CULTURAL EVENTS

Older adults in north Harris County seem well served with adequate access to the wide array of cultural events in this region according to the group surveyed. At the same time, the survey respondents indicated that they do not know to use senior discounts.

Recommendations from the Coalition include a suggestion that cultural venues be equipped with assistive devices for visual and hearing disabilities. Additionally, it was suggested that older adults would benefit from more weekday and weekend matinee performances. The Senior Guidance Directory which is published by the Houston Junior Forum, should expand its listings to include cultural events for older adults, particularly those, which provide scheduling, pricing, and assistive devices to support older adults.

EDUCATION

For the purposes of this project, the term education encompassed college credit instruction as well as leisure learning or community education offerings. While older adults believe that they have fair access to educational opportunities, many do not view these opportunities to be very affordable or well promoted.

Suggestions arising from this population encouraged education providers to consider structuring classes as one-day sessions offered closer to home, rather than classes held over a number of meetings at the remote college campus. The most requested subjects for seniors included computers, leisure offerings (arts, travel, hobbies, etc.), and foreign languages.

EMPLOYMENT/VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The survey group indicated some need for better access to information about volunteer and paid employment opportunities. While most adults over 55 years of age do not work for pay, many are engaged in volunteer service. Many others indicated some level of frustration at not being able to tap opportunities that would utilize their skills. One respondent wrote, "I want to work because I need the money and also because I want to feel needed."

The Coalition challenges the business community, Chambers of Commerce, and The WorkSource (our local workforce authority), to identify and highlight opportunities for older adults, which would provide income and/or volunteer work and most importantly, would tap this wealth of experience and provide an outlet for productive older citizens.

FINANCIAL/LEGAL SERVICES

The older citizens of North Harris County perceive that they have sufficient access to financial and legal services. The private and public sectors seem to be addressing this need with success. The Coalition recommends that groups such as Northwest Assistance Ministries Sixty Plus program, North Harris College, and Precinct 4 consider coordinating educational meetings on financial and legal concerns of seniors. Sources of such expertise would include the BBB Education Foundation, the Houston Bar Association, and the Texas Young Lawyers Association.

HEALTH CARE/HUMAN SERVICES

The number one priority and concern for our older citizens is health care. Sixty-seven percent of our population does not have prescription drug coverage. A disturbing 23 percent of the surveyed group indicated that they routinely forego medical treatment due to cost. The Harris County Hospital District issues Gold Cards to eligible adults so that they may access public clinic services. Many seniors allow their Gold Cards to lapse, and when it is discovered, it is too late.

The Coalition encourages a system of notification by the Harris County Hospital District to seniors whose Gold Cards will lapse in 60 to 90 days to help them keep their eligibility up to date. The Coalition also encourages action and study by the Elder Health Promotion Task Force, a part of the Gateway to Care Project, which identifies uninsured and under insured adults and works to reduce the use of emergency room trips to manage non-emergency health issues.

The area of health care is so critical for our population that the Coalition strongly recommends further study be conducted. Signs that we may be moving in the wrong direction are becoming evident. For example, a local hospital recently cancelled transportation services, which enabled many seniors to access health services in northwest Houston. This one issue in the Aging Texas Well research is a "sleeping giant," which could impact our region in a tragic way.

PHYSICAL FITNESS PROGRAMS

Although older adults in North Harris County believe they generally have adequate access to physical fitness programs, the Coalition believed that fitness for older adults should be emphasized enthusiastically throughout our region. Senior programs, the colleges, and community centers should commit to participative programs, which educate and involve older adults in developing mental and physical fitness that will carry into their older years.

SOCIAL LIFE

Social life is alive and well for seniors in north Harris County among those surveyed. Individuals in this group seek more weekend senior activities and some responded as feeling ignored by their churches. The Coalition urges the clergy to be aware of this population in their congregations and to promote outreach.

HOUSING

The second most critical concern for seniors in North Harris County is housing. They perceive that there is not enough affordable housing and escalating rents and mortgages might cause them to lose their homes and apartments.

The Coalition recommends city and county officials collaborate with our regional office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Harris County Community Development, the City of Houston Housing Authority, and private sector partners to identify and develop affordable housing and assistive living facilities for seniors. The Coalition will be focusing on this issue in 2004 to insure housing becomes of less concern to aging citizens in this region. A benchmark project that should be noted was the Cornerstone Gardens, a senior-care facility that was the result of a public and private sector partnership to provide affordable housing for low-income older adults.

TRANSPORTATION

Although not as critical as health or housing, transportation ranked high among areas of concern for older citizens. A surprising 63 percent of those surveyed drive an automobile. This population indicated that in general, their most immediate transportation needs were being met. However, this is an area where there is an underlying fear that in the future, their mobility would be reduced due to health or financial problems. One respondent stated, "Access to all services depends on one's ability to continue driving." In our automobile-dependent city, public transportation will have to change or we will face disturbing consequences. As more and more older citizens discontinue driving, other modes of transportation must be made available.

The Coalition strongly recommends public transportation issues be studied with regard to older adults, where they live, and where they must travel. The Harris County Transportation Coordinating Council must focus time and resources to the transportation needs of our older citizens as our suburban areas age. In addition, the Coalition challenges the FM 1960 area businesses to work collaboratively to provide a free shuttle for seniors that will transport them between apartments, assisted living centers, the hospitals/clinics and the major shopping areas along FM 1960.

This report and a comprehensive listing of resources for older adults developed by the Coalition and can be viewed at: www.nhceducatesu.com and click on "Aging Well".