

Seniors CAN

Use it or lose it.

The kind of advice your mother probably gave you. But as our population ages, these words take on particular poignancy. Finding ongoing mental challenges to keep the brain engaged is crucial to staying mentally alert later in life. Armed with this information, increasing numbers of older adults are finding opportunities for lifelong learning through community education.

Take Seniors CAN, for example—a life-skills training program that helps older adults maintain high-quality independent living by enhancing their mental acuity and mastery. This hands-on program was developed nearly 10 years ago in southern Nevada. To date, the Seniors CAN program has reached more than 2,000 individuals in Nevada, and more than 125 copies of the curriculum have been sold nationwide and in Canada.

“People who go through our program report less stress and loneliness,” says originator Claudia Collins, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension aging specialist. “The

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participants feel better and more confident, which can lead to living longer and enjoying life more.

“The crux of the project’s success is the incorporating of lesson-

related information into seniors’ daily experiences—converting abstract concepts into practical application.”

Meeting a critical need in southern Nevada

Southern Nevada’s Clark County is one of the country’s fastest growing communities and has evolved into one of the nation’s top retirement destinations. One of every four new residents and more than 26 percent of the county population of two million people



Claudia Collins, far right, demonstrates how specific foods can be used to improve overall health and well-being.

Photo by Marilyn Ming

is 55 years of age or older. Many of these older adults, particularly the new residents, lack traditional support structures such as friends and relatives.

Seniors CAN, a four-month program, is offered in English and Spanish at community sites such as senior centers, older-adult housing and hospital outreach centers. The small class size of 20 participants shapes the program through ongoing evaluations that rely heavily upon feedback from seniors. New topics and information are constantly being added as a result of input from the participants. The 15-lesson program includes nutrition, personal safety, food safety, financial strategies, health and wellness and active aging techniques. The weekly, two-hour sessions are based on teaching principles that are designed to enhance cognitive function in older adults.

One woman summed up her experiences with the following comment, “I’m 81 and I learn so many things that help me day-to-day. You’d think at my age I’d know more!”

Achieving a higher quality of life for older adults

Seniors CAN appeals to elders from a wide variety of ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but most are managing on a limited income. Seventy percent of participants report a household income less than \$20,000 a year, with 23 percent under \$10,000.

Evaluation data of nearly 960 participants from 83 program sites, including low-income housing and senior centers in urban and rural Clark County, suggest the following results:

- Statistically significant improvements were found following the intervention, with participants demonstrating increased mastery and knowledge and decreased loneliness and stress; and
- The lowest-income participants (35 percent) and minority seniors (32 percent) demonstrated the greatest levels of improvement.




Photo by Heidi Petermeier

Aging study uncovers multiple needs and gaps in services

Nevada has the fastest growing senior population in the country. At the turn of the century, Nevada had 218,929 citizens who were age 65 or older. By 2030, this number is expected to be 797,179 ... an increase of 264 percent.

Claudia Collins listens to questions from Seniors CAN participants.

“While the quantitative results of the program demonstrated statistical improvements in health-related characteristics, even more striking is the amazing change in self-confidence, socializing with peers and an enthusiastic approach toward life reflected by participants,” Collins says. “They make changes in their eating behaviors, their interaction with health professionals and, generally, reflect a renewed sense of self-assurance.”

“This program has jarred me out of my comfort zone, and opened up a whole new world of information,” reported an 86-year-old man who is now a lifelong learner. 

For more information on Seniors CAN, contact Claudia Collins, (702) 257-5531, or collinsc@unce.unr.edu.

Each generation of older adults is living longer, increasing the likelihood that they will experience higher rates of chronic illness and functional disability than earlier generations.

In 2006, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension conducted an extensive assessment of aging issues in Nevada, using forums with key community leaders to help determine present and future needs as well as gaps in the state’s aging programs and coordination of aging services.

Survey findings indicated that Cooperative Extension could make a significant contribution to Nevada’s older citizens and their families by complementing existing programs and services in various ways. Cooperative Extension is positioned to provide statewide training, education and research in the areas of health, nutrition, financial management, well-being, social policy, ethnic differences in aging and to help build capacity in organizations, agencies and communities.

“Cooperative Extension is exploring ways to move forward with a comprehensive statewide aging program,” said Dean Karen Hinton. “However, we must collaborate and partner with other groups to effectively implement the strategies identified in the assessment.”

To get started, Cooperative Extension and community college faculty and graduate students are developing a pilot program to train volunteers across Nevada—including librarians, senior center managers and others—on how to most effectively teach our growing older-adult population.

For a copy of the executive summary or a full report of the study, contact Karen Hinton, (775) 784-7070, or hintonk@unce.unr.edu, or Jeanne Hilton, Cooperative Extension aging program specialist and professor of social work, (775) 722-3555 or hilton@unr.edu.

—Alice Good '78