

Guest commentary

JFCS Senior Center joins celebration of 'Living Well'

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September is National Senior Center Month. As a new generation looks to redefine retirement, senior centers are evolving to reflect a more empowered vision of aging. In that spirit, this year's theme, as designated by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) is Senior Centers: Experts at Living Well.



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The senior center as we know it today was first introduced in New York City in 1943 to provide social activities, nutritious meals and case management to adults age 60 and older, particularly those with low incomes. Seventy years later, senior centers are recognized as one of the most widely used services supported by the Older Americans Act of 1965. An estimated 11,000 centers are helping millions of older adults from all walks of life continue to thrive in their communities.

Today's senior centers are connecting older adults with meaningful experiences and volunteer opportunities and increasing their access to valuable benefits and resources. Through evidence-based programs, older adults are managing their health and social needs

so that they can continue to live in the community as safely as possible and as long as possible. Senior centers are evolving to reflect a new view of aging that empowers the people they serve.

While the first senior center was established in 1943, it wasn't until Jan. 22 of this year that Collier County opened its first and only senior center. On that date, JFCS of Southwest Florida opened the doors to 88 adults over age 60 for a hot lunch and entertainment. In the world of local senior services, history was made.

From that first opening in January, with a membership of 88, the JFCS Senior Center has evolved to a membership roster of 365 seniors with an average of 120 attending the Wednesday "Lunch and More" program. Open five days a week and offering programs that include art classes, movie matinees, beginning Spanish, knitting classes, computer and cell-phone lessons, a writers group and mahjong, cards and café, the JFCS Senior Center is helping our local seniors redefine their own retirement.

A monthly discussion group focuses on current events, such as the crisis in the Middle East and other timely issues of interest. Reflecting the JFCS commitment to keeping the senior center a "community affair," entertainment following lunch on Wednesdays has been presented by notable community groups including Artis—Naples, the Sugden Community

Theatre, Naples Opera and the Naples Tappers. Representatives from the Naples Zoo, Naples Botanical Garden and NCH Health-care System have shared interesting and valuable information. Silver Sneakers "gentle exercise" program and tai chi classes help to keep our members physically fit.

The JFCS Senior Center is open to anyone who is 60 years old or older. Current membership is diverse in terms of race and religion, and our members range in age from 60 to 102. Senior Center membership is \$15 per person per year and that entitles members to all programs that are offered, including lunch, at no additional charge.

The success of the JFCS Senior Center can be attributed to a dedicated staff and board of trustees and a cadre of 90 fully vetted and trained volunteers who keep the center running, as well as strong partnerships forged in the community. Collier Area Transportation is working closely with us to assist getting members to the Senior Center, and Collier County Department of Social Services and Area Agency on Aging provide valuable information to our seniors on important questions related to aging well.

At one point there was a question as to whether or not Collier County needed a senior center. That question has been answered with a resounding "Yes!" The rapid success of the JFCS Senior Center has presented some chal-

lenges, and the most significant challenge we are currently facing is space. Exploration and preliminary plans are being discussed to double the size of the current senior center from approximately 3,100 square feet to 6,200 square feet in its current location. Of course, funding streams will have to be secured to make these discussions a reality.

Currently the JFCS Senior Center is primarily funded through the generosity of community donors, with corporate and foundation support from BMO Private Bank, the Community Foundation of Collier County and VITAS Innovative Hospice Care. Just as JFCS was committed to meeting the needs of seniors through developing the first senior center in Collier County, we are committed to increasing our programs and our space to meet the ever-expanding needs of our constituents.

Please join JFCS as we celebrate National Senior Center Month by getting involved. Drop by and see what is happening at 5025 Castello Drive in Naples and you will feel the energy of our empowered and engaged seniors. You may even want to become a member or a volunteer. One thing is for certain, you will see a social hub where older adults are engaged in activities that foster their physical and psychological health. Or, as one of our members said recently, "The senior center is a place where I can get out of my house and feel at home."