

Senior Centers Evolve to Attract Boomers This isn't your grandmother's bingo hall

by: Sally Abrahms | from: AARP Bulletin | February 13, 2012

Senior centers around the country are moving out the bingo tables to make way for basketball courts, fitness centers and yoga classes.

While the nation's 1,500 senior centers still focus on services for the frail and infirm, they are preparing for the deluge of fitness-focused boomers.

"I'm starting to see more people my age," says Sandra Chambers, 57, who sometimes brings her 84-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer's, along with her to the Wood County Senior Center in Ohio. "Zumba is what started it all," says Chambers. She spotted an ad for eight weeks of the dance-focused exercise lessons for \$20. "My daughter thinks it's great. She's noticed a difference in my health and I'm losing weight!"

Chambers is also cost-conscious. Compared with hefty monthly health club memberships that can be as much as \$90 per month, senior centers are a bargain.

Today's senior centers, and other community models for the over-50 crowd, are hoping to become one-stop health, social, recreational and life-long learning resource centers that meet the needs of the "young-old" and the "old-old." It could be a first-rate exercise facility with an indoor track, basketball court and strength training, but also chair yoga for the less mobile.

In addition to fitness programs of every stripe, senior centers are adding book signings, dating-again workshops, experts on downsizing and midlife issues, art studios, theatre programs, meditation, and computer classes to learn Microsoft programs, résumé writing, blogging or how to get on Skype with the grandkids.

Still, boomers are not making a mad stampede to senior centers—yet.

"If we want to attract boomers, these places have to become cooler



Senior centers now emphasize fitness, the arts, and life-long learning.

Photo by George Contorakes/Masterfile

and hipper and there needs to be something they want here as well as like-minded people," says Marcy Simon, director of older adult fitness at the Educational Alliance, a nonprofit community-based organization that created the Center for Balanced Living (CBL), a senior center on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

The CBL is now staying open evenings and weekends, hosting wine tastings and dances with live music, and offering a wide range of workshops and discussions from spirituality to sexuality.

Senior center of the future?

A new senior center concept gaining attention is **Mathers—More Than a Café**, located in three Chicago neighborhoods. The draw is a public restaurant open to all ages. In order to take classes or use the other facilities, however, you must be age 55-plus. You pay for classes on a per-course basis and can join the Mather Advantage Discount program, which offers a 20 percent discount on food and classes.

"People have looked at the café concept as a way to attract baby boomers. The décor makes us Starbucks wannabes! It's modern, and when you walk in, you know there's something different," says Betsie Sassen, assistant vice president of Mather LifeWay's community initiatives. "It doesn't feel like a place targeting older adults."

Senior center directors from as far away as Japan and Korea have come to observe the Mathers café model, which has been replicated by 30 organizations.

The outreach efforts on the part of senior centers to a younger demographic may be starting to have an effect. "I have a different perspective on aging than I did before," says Jennifer Powell, 44, vice president for development of the Educational Alliance, which has offices at CBL. "I'm seeing older adults who are physically strong, engaged, comfortable in their own bodies, still working toward goals, and having fun. And then I think, that is my future."

For more information about Mather LifeWays Café Plus, visit www.matherlifeways.com/cafeplus.