

Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative

Issue Area: Recreational Opportunities

Contact: Anna Schuetz
Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative Coordinator
104 Huff Hall, MC-584
1206 South Fourth Street
Champaign, Illinois 61821
(217) 333-4410 (Phone)
(217) 244-1935 (Fax)
aschuetz@uiuc.edu

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In 2003 the Illinois Rural Recreation Development Project launched a program entitled the Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative as a component of the Healthy Rural Communities Project. The program is funded through the Illinois Attorney General's Office until 2005. It seeks to increase awareness of health issues to seniors as well as provide outlets for seniors to gain better health. The program has gone beyond its goal of providing avenues for reaching wellness as participants quote numerous other benefits the program has achieved. The program is unique because it gives money and power to create programs to determined citizens in the rural communities. This allows all the communities to create their own, unique program to reach wellness as the local older citizens see fit.

The program is designed to help seniors take active roles in maintaining their overall health and well-being. The initiative started as a wellness conference hosted by the Illinois Rural Recreation Development Project. Teams of older adults from eight rural communities in Illinois attended, and they learned about issues involving mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. The conference provided a forum not only for learning but also for discussion so the older adult teams could begin to fine tune their interest. After the conference, the teams received a five hundred dollar stipend from the Healthy Rural Communities Project. Each team used their stipend to develop a sustainable community park and recreation wellness program to promote active lifestyles for older adults. The Healthy Rural Communities Project requested the following commitment from each senior group interested in participating in the Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative:

- Commitment by the community group to participate in the project for all three years.
- Recruit and retain four to eight citizens over the age of 60 who would serve at least two years on a Community Wellness team.
- Participation by all the wellness team members in an annual two-day educational wellness workshop led by professional speakers who are seniors. The fees will be

all inclusive (hotels, meals, and sessions) and will be covered by the grant for the first year. The following two years, the grant will subsidize the fees for senior groups.

- Participation by the team leader(s) in semi annual planning meetings.
- Commitment by the team to use the \$500 stipend to plan and implement some type of wellness program in their own community.
- Permission to conduct surveys to assess current levels of physical activity, attitudes toward physical activity and limitations to physical activity.
- Assistance by the senior wellness teams in the data collecting process by coordinating follow-up phone calls to encourage people to return surveys as well as helping with other administration tasks as needed.

The program has been successful so far because it has created determined senior leaders in the communities. These leaders are not only interested in providing a healthy recreational activity, but they are interested in promoting all types of wellness from social to mental. In Roseville, the community team started a walking program, which has provided benefits outside of the health range. A participant quoted, “One side benefit is the camaraderie. After we take our walk, we get together for coffee so we’re getting exercise and fellowship.” Older adult recreational programs need to provide more than an active form of enjoyment; recreational programs need to provide a means to improve mental, physical, and social wellness.

Related Resources:

Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative.

<http://www.ilruralrec.uiuc.edu/programs/senior_wellness.html>.

Illinois Rural Recreation Development Project.

<<http://www.ilruralrec.uiuc.edu/index.cfm>>.

“Program Challenges Aging Stereotypes.” ACE News.

<<http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/news/stories/news2417.html>>.

“Illinois Senior Wellness Initiative Revealed.” McLean County Extension News.

<http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/mclean/news/0306_nfc.html#2>.

Additional Contacts: Dr. Laura Payne

Leisure Studies Department
University of Illinois
104 Huff Hall, MC-584
1206 South Fourth Street
Champaign, Illinois 61821
(217) 333-4410 (Phone)
(217) 244-1935 (Fax)