

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

ACAAA program aims to transform senior centers

By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

Say the words “senior center” and to some people, it triggers a positive connotation—to others, a negative one.

“Maybe we need to come up with a new name so seniors don’t think of them as holding tanks,” says Marion Scott of Penn Hills. “For some reason, fewer seniors are going to the centers.”

As a senior, Marion has seen firsthand the declining attendance at senior centers in the region. She sits on the advisory board at the City of Pittsburgh Homewood Senior Center and participates in their exercise programs, line dancing and various craft activities. She belongs to the Camera Club at Vintage, takes aerobic classes and participates in their SilverSneakers program. She also attends activities at Rankin Christian Center about twice a month.

“The centers need to be transformed to make them more attractive to seniors,” she says. “Their image needs to be changed.”

So when she heard about the Senior Community Center Transformation Project at the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA), she wanted to help. For nearly four decades, ACAAA has funded, in whole or in part, 17 provider agencies that currently operate 60 senior centers throughout Allegheny County. (There are other senior center programs throughout Allegheny County not affiliated or funded by ACAAA.)

“I wanted to offer my input as a regular consumer of the centers because I feel there is a lot that

could be done to get more seniors involved,” she says.

Marion hopes to eventually see more seniors take advantage of what the centers have to offer.

“I talked to many seniors, and while some of them like what’s going on at the centers, there are others who have their own reasons for not attending,” she says. “I feel that seniors have a lot to contribute to help make changes in the way they are being operated. Many feel that nothing is being offered right now. The image that some people have of a center is that you come down in your wheelchair and play bingo, and that’s not true.”

Marion stresses that seniors are instrumental to this project.

“We need seniors to bring suggestions and ideas that will help improve the image of the centers and make them more attractive so more people could use them,” she says.

Joe Barker, independent services bureau chief with ACAAA, says that seniors will be represented in every setting where this transformation project is discussed and reviewed.

“Seniors are very important in driving this process,” he explains. “Without knowing what seniors want now and what emerging interests that seniors will have as the boomers and other groups begin to age, the system may not meet the needs of seniors who are in the community.”

According to Joe, ACAAA has set up three groups consisting of members of the community (including seniors) to get together for very specific tasks in this process. The groups include:



Chuck LeClaire/Pittsburgh Senior News

Board member Marion Scott

- **Steering Committee** – This committee is made up of a small group of 10 to 12 people with diverse areas of expertise, including healthy aging, social and community services, research, and business and nonprofit management, who will help design the future system.

- **Community Advisory Board** – This board of about 100 people will review the proposed systems, ask questions and offer feedback about what could be missing. They will act as a feedback mechanism to the Steering Committee to guide it.

- **Senior Voices Leadership Team** – These are groups of seniors who will meet at various locations throughout the county with researchers from the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA). GSPIA researchers will conduct senior focus groups titled “Senior Voices.” This will be another significant means to assure that seniors throughout the county are heard regarding what they are looking for in senior services, what their interests are, where services should be delivered and how often they should be delivered.

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Bill Moffitt, a semi-retired senior residing in the North Hills, serves on the Steering Committee and Senior Voices Leadership Team. Because of his extensive background as a past volunteer with the United Way, he was also asked to join the Community Advisory Board.

“I was looking for something where I could benefit a group and also help out in the community,” he says, explaining why he got involved. “The timing of this project is good because Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh are becoming older communities.”

Bill says that the committees will look at the way senior services work, how they are funded and financed, and how services have been delivered through the centers.

“We’re going to have a good group to bounce ideas off,” he says. “We have people serving on these committees who have an extensive background in delivering services.”

The project could take up to 18 months to complete. For more information about the Senior Center Transformation Project, call SeniorLine at (412) 350-5460. *PSN*

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