



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Celebrating National Senior Center Month, September 2022



History of National Senior Center Month

Each year in September, the Aging Network Celebrates National Senior Center Month. This month recognizes and promotes centers as community focal points on aging, a place where older adults can gather for support and encouragement, and a location for attendees to access services and participate in activities. This is all vital for the health and well-being of the older adults in the community.

The history of this celebration can be traced back to May 1979. The National Council on Aging, the U.S. Conference of Mayors Aging Task Force, and the full Senate and House Select Committee on Aging, supported the concept of national recognition. President Ronald Reagan signed the first proclamation in 1985 with the support of the National Institute of Senior Centers.

Highlighting New Partnerships: Lowcountry Area Agency on Aging & Beaufort County Parks and Recreation

The 2022 theme for Senior Center Month is Strengthening Community Connections. What a better way to celebrate than shining a spotlight on a new partnership in South Carolina between the Lowcountry Area Agency on Aging and Beaufort County Parks and Recreation?

Shanon Loper, Director at Beaufort, said, "We are thoroughly excited about the partnership. Our mission with our 60 & Better Program is to strengthen the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social health of older adults in our community. To meet this goal, we provide leisure activities, meal services, and special events that allow opportunities for education, social interaction, and physical/nutritional wellness."

The partnership came during a particularly challenging time characterized by prolonged senior center and meal site closings related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Loper said, "When opening the sites again to seniors, we focused on getting out in all of the areas and making sure the entire county had this service offered. We focused on getting to churches and to local doctors and retail stores. Staff spent some days going door to door. It paid off quickly as some centers reached over 25 seniors after newly opening. To date, we have over 190 seniors involved in our group dining program at six different sites throughout Beaufort County."

On a daily basis, you'll find older adults enjoying the interaction with community peers. Loper remarked, "Our staff has done a phenomenal job in making sure our seniors have more than just a meal when they arrive to their site. Many activities are held on a weekly basis, from bingo, puzzles, jewelry making, baking, dancing, potting, painting, to sit and fit exercises. Our seniors are always busy!". In addition to activities at the sites, Beaufort County Parks and Recreation offers local trips to museums, passive parks, and recently, a trip to the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston. Other plans on the horizon include an annual group



Letisha Scotland, Director of Aging for the Lowcountry Area Agency on Aging, has been thrilled to see the sites reopened and bustling with activities again. Scotland and Ashley Young, Human Services Manager, explained that when looking for a service provider, they wanted an agency who is well known in the community and offers a variety of activities for seniors. So far the transition has been described as smooth. There have been no gaps in service and the seniors are enjoying the activities and trips. There are new clients attending the centers in Beaufort County and there are plans to add 3 additional centers to their portfolio. Bluffton center has seen the biggest increase since reopening July 5 after being closed for two years. Beaufort County Parks and Recreation wanted to create a "fresh" and "updated" feel by adding some new décor and furniture to sites. This has really added another element of newness after prolonged closures. Additionally, the Bluffton site moved to a larger side of the building to give more space for the seniors to enjoy activities.



This new partnership came at an opportune time. Lowcountry Area Agency on Aging (AAA) recently took a "deep dive" into the Nutrition Program in the four county region of Beaufort, Colleton, Hampton, and Jasper. Between October 2021 and January 2022, the AAA reviewed projections for older adult population growth and conducted surveys and interviews with program participants, service providers, and community members. The process proved to be instrumental in understanding the current satisfaction with the existing program and in identifying steps for adjusting and repositioning the program to attract more participants. Some of the suggestions gathered during these activities included: contemporary facilities with upgrades of equipment, different activities to meet different age-groups (i.e. different activities based on mobility), and suitable activities for seniors that include outdoor events. Also, it was found that approximately half of the respondents preferred to spend time with the younger generation.

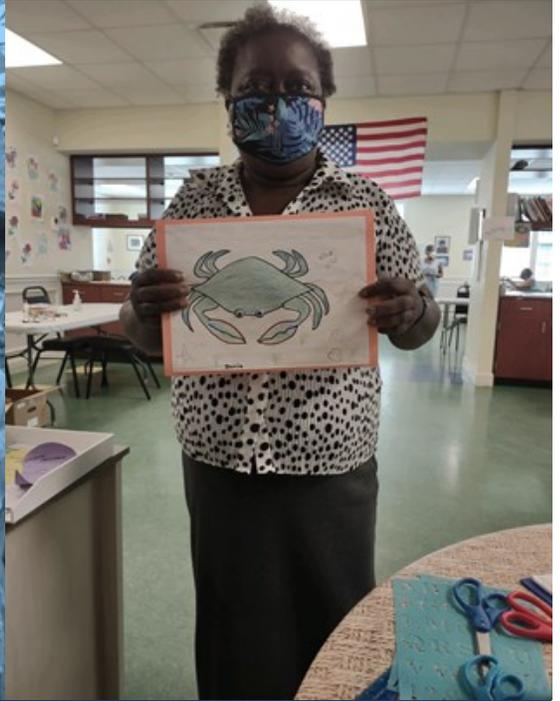


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A Bluffton gem...

Loper talked about a special participant, Ms. Rivers who attends the Bluffton Center location. She is 104 years young and had not visited the center since programming was shut down in March of 2020. As soon as Bluffton re-opened, she was back! She told the staff how excited she was to be there again and how she had been worried she would not be around when the center reopened. Staff agree that providing emotional support and social health opportunities to older adults in the community is extremely important and rewarding. "Seeing Ms. Rivers smile and interacting with her peers has made all of the planning and outreach well worth it," remarked Loper.



In closing, Loper said, "Our partnership with Lowcountry Area Agency on Aging has helped us to provide quality health programs for the 60 & Better in our community. We would like to thank Letisha Scotland, Director of Aging, for all of her support. She has been phenomenal to work with. We look forward to continuing this partnership for years to come!"

Scotland echoed this sentiment and described that the excitement from the clients is a true testament to the breath of life Beaufort County Parks and Recreation has given to the nutrition program. Though the partnership is only 3 months in, the energy is already palpable.