

COMMUNITY

A Place for Friends

Metro Detroit senior centers offer lunch, classes, health services and more

By Joyce Wiswell

Groucho Marx famously quipped that he didn't want to belong to any club that would have him as a member. Unfortunately, that very attitude keeps a lot of people from enjoying senior centers.

"People think we are something like Mayberry R.F.D. — people in rocking chairs on the porch," says Alysa Hunton, fund development, marketing and public relations manager at Rochester's Older Persons' Commission (OPC). "That is not us!"

SaTrice Coleman-Betts, executive director of St. Patrick Senior Center in Detroit, agrees.

"Sometimes the aging have the most ageist views; they don't want to be with a lot of old people," Coleman-Betts says. "But people's concept of what is 'old' and what our senior center is, is not the same."

"Aging in place" — defined by the Centers for Disease Control as "the ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age, income or ability level" — has become a big focus for today's baby boomers. And it means a lot more than installing extra handrails.

'90 Is Nothing These Days'

Just as important as physically safeguarding your home is remaining active and open to new people and experiences. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 11 million (or 28 percent) of people aged



St. Patrick Senior Center in Detroit offers programs for everything from exercise and cooking to fall prevention and diabetes management.

65 and older lived alone in 2010. An AARP study found that 35 percent of those 45 and older, especially those with lower incomes, are lonely. Finally, the American Geriatric Society reports that 22 percent of older Americans

say they have no community support — but these folks must not live in metro Detroit, which is rich in resources. "We're living longer because we're taking such good care of our health," Hunton says. "Ninety is nothing these days, but you have to have someplace to go. A center such as ours is becoming more and more important. A lot of assisted living facilities are



The OPC in Rochester is a 92,000-square-foot facility that includes an Olympic-sized pool, pottery studio, woodshop, computer lab, café and gymnasium.

really wonderful, but it's not the same as being in your own home."

The OPC is virtually free for residents of Rochester, Rochester Hills and Oakland Township, while non-residents can join annually for \$175, or \$225 per married couple. The facility encompasses 92,000 square feet dedicated to physical and emotional well-being, including an Olympic-sized pool, auditorium, pottery studio, woodshop, computer lab, café — and even a gift shop. You can take classes in scuba diving, tai chi, ukulele or Chinese brush painting.

"It's always packed in here. There are about 150 classes, programs and support groups each month," Hunton says.

The OPC also offers Meals on Wheels, loans out medical equipment and has a fleet of 24 mini-buses to take seniors to doctor's appointments or grocery shopping. As many as 100 people show up each weekday for the afternoon lunch.

Take Advantage of Resources

Darlene Harmon, 74, comes six days a week to walk and line dance; she says her husband doesn't like it and "you don't need a partner."

"Afterwards we do the dining room for socializing. We're having fun and we're laughing," Harmon says. "The programs they have, like nutrition and little exercises we can do, teach us how to live longer in our homes. I don't know what I would do without this place."

Lunch is also popular at St. Patrick Senior Center, drawing about 250 seniors each day. Founded by the Racine Dominicans, the center partners with organizations such as the Agency on Aging to offer a variety of programs. These include fall prevention, diabetes management, cooking classes and supermarket field trips. Membership starts at just \$5 per year.

Classes range from Hawaiian ballroom dancing

to mastering the computer. There are free health services like blood pressure and sugar readings and informational sessions on getting the most out of Medicare and Medicaid. The Senior Advocacy and Companion Care program has peers assisting each other in a number of ways, such as following hospital stays.

Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit offers a plethora of support for the aging, from Meals on Wheels to home safety assessments and care management through its Eldercare Solutions division.

"A tremendous amount of people are aging in place," says Eldercare Solutions Director Lynn Brewer. "Fantastic programming exists; you just have to get out for it. Otherwise you end up being socially isolated and depressed."

Brewer recommends the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield for everything from exercise to musical performances to arts and crafts. JCC's Institute for Retired Professionals provides an intellectual and social environment with lectures and seminars on topics as diverse as technology, opera and labor unions.



The Older Persons' Commission is virtually free for residents of Rochester, Rochester Hills and Oakland Township, while non-residents can join for an annual fee.

SOAR, which stands for the Society of Active Retirees, a Farmington Hills-based initiative with Wayne State University, helps older minds keep sharp with non-credit courses in art, law, politics, history and even sudoku ("yoga for the mind").

Letty Azar, chief development officer at the Detroit Area on Aging, wishes more people took advantage of all that is out there.

"The National Council on Aging estimates that seniors walk away from \$7,000 a year in public benefits and support they did not know they were eligible for, and this is not only low-income people," she says. "We lay the best plans for birthing, for college, for weddings — every process in life except aging. We only talk about that when we need something. But there are a lot of resources for those who want to embrace the aging process." 🌟