

## Senior Centers

# Senior community centers are portals to activities, education and wellness

By Alicia M. Colombo

Adults 60 or older will find a warm welcome at the senior community centers and satellite meal sites located in neighborhoods throughout Philadelphia. Senior centers provide vital services, from serving meals to providing help with transportation, along with a range of recreational and education activities. Their group trips and programs, which cater to a variety of interests and hobbies, make senior centers social hubs for older adults. Individual centers' offerings vary, but many include classes on computer use, art, music, dance and other exercise, along with social, volunteer and cultural activities.

"Social engagement is so important for each of us as we grow older. Staying active and connecting with others has both cognitive benefits and physical health benefits," said Mary Catherine Dabrowski, senior center



supervisor at Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA), which funds 28 senior community centers and satellite meal sites in Philadelphia. "Everything you do in a senior community center keeps you active and engaged."

Baby boomers and other younger seniors tend to feel that they are "not old enough" to attend a senior community center, Dabrowski said, but this could not be further from the truth. "There are benefits for people of all ages," she said. "The multi-generational experience in a center actually inspires people to look forward to the years ahead and to aging well."

Many senior centers serve as extensions of the neighborhoods where they are located. They are places where seniors can meet and mingle with like-minded cohorts. "As we grow older, we encounter many losses in our lives. Belonging to a group in which others have gone through similar losses and can



Paola Noguerras

**St. Anne's Senior Center member Barbara Seuss looks on as student Layla Jama Cohen decorates a wooden mosaic tile as part of an intergenerational art project.**

support you through difficulty is priceless," Dabrowski said. "Relationships at senior community centers are often built around shared experiences. Friendships of all types form in a senior center."

The stories that follow focus on just two Philadelphia senior community centers.

### At home in Chinatown

On Lok Social Service Center for Seniors, located at 213 N. 10th St. in the heart of Philadelphia's Chinatown district, is a small building with few staff members that has become a second home for seniors from throughout the city. The center draws on the artistic and cultural interests of Asian seniors, offering programs such as Chinese music, line and social dance; English and Chinese language classes; exercise with a cultural twist, including tai chi and qi qong; and Chinese brush-painting classes. The center also connects seniors with local and citywide resources.

"On Lok helps seniors in the community to live healthy and satisfying lives," said Echo Chung, center director. "The most important general service the center provides is that of language translation between English and Chinese, in both Mandarin and Cantonese."

Linkage to vital community resources is especially important for seniors who are low-income or have mobility issues. The center's staff, along with some of its members, help

seniors apply for various benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and the state property tax/rent rebate. "We help them fill out application forms that are in English or which they may have trouble understanding," Chung said.

Centers are more than the buildings that house them – they are like family. Christine "Wing" Fung, 73, has been a member of On Lok for 10 years and travels by train from Huntingdon Valley in the Far Northeast several times a week to participate in On Lok activities. She started off teaching English classes at the center but was so drawn in by the atmosphere that she became a member. "After I retired, I stayed to help out in the office so I could help seniors apply for benefits," Fung said. "A lot of the members don't speak English, so I really have to help them fill out the forms."

Many of the center's members emigrated from China and now live in Philadelphia's diverse Asian neighborhoods, including Chinatown, the Northeast and South Philadelphia. "We all come because we can speak Chinese and feel at home here," said Fung, who was born in Hong Kong and moved to Philadelphia in 1969. "When we all retired, we wanted to do something with the community."

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A week at On Lok typically includes computer and iPad classes; karaoke; the singing of Mandarin and Cantonese folk and modern songs; a Chinese culture class on ancient literature; and Mandarin language class.

The Mandarin class is especially popular. "Most of the seniors are Cantonese immigrants from the southern part of China," Chung said. "They want to learn Mandarin, China's official national dialect."

That's just one of the many ways On Lok serves its members, Chung said: "To give seniors the ability to live independently and to maximize their health and well-being is our goal. We are the bridge to the seniors and community."

### Port Richmond partnership

St. Anne's Senior Center, located at 2607 E. Cumberland St., has been a fixture in Port Richmond since 1970. After serving the community as a full-service senior community center for 47 years, St. Anne's became a satellite meal site in July. That means shorter hours and fewer staff members than a full-fledged center.

Nonetheless, the change "doesn't limit what we can accomplish," said Karen Rouse, manager for St. Anne's. "As a satellite, we give members the things they need." Those things include daily meals, social services (a counselor is on-site three days a week) and transportation. "But beyond that," she said, "we give them what they want: recreation and socialization."

In response to seniors' needs and preferences, the center has chosen an early schedule; it is open weekdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. "Most of our programming was in the morning and early afternoon; we were an early group," Rouse said. "So, the activities are being organized [in much] the way the center traditionally offered them. We can still do much of the same things, but we just have to be creative with the time constraints."

Ongoing activities at St. Anne's include coffee hour, a support group, pottery class and nutritionist/cooking demonstrations.

St. Anne's attracts 125 active members each week and is still gaining new members. "They may come in ... to see what the center has to offer, then decide to stay or join," Rouse said.

The site's longtime partnership with Greensgrow Farm, located across the street, has been going strong for more than 10 years.



Frank Burd

The center has a small raised-bed garden plot at Greensgrow, where senior volunteers tend and pick herbs and small tomatoes and peppers. The center's staff coordinates with its gardening volunteers and on-site nutritionist to use freshly grown produce and herbs in cooking demonstrations. During the growing season, Greensgrow brings a farm stand to the center every other Friday so members and others from the community can purchase fresh, locally grown, organic produce.

Another successful community partnership is the annual intergenerational art project involving children ages 8 to 12 who attend the Portside Arts Center Summer Day Camp Program. Seniors volunteer to mentor the children, working closely with them on an art project. Last year, the collaboration produced a mural that now hangs in front of St. Anne's. This year, participants made a wooden sculpture using popsicle sticks and other objects.

"We're called a satellite because we're only open four hours a day, but we're so much more than a meals program," Rouse said. "We are doing everything we did before. We haven't seen a change in consumers. If anything, the interest in our services and programs continues to increase."

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To locate a center in your neighborhood or for more information about center activities, call the PCA Helpline at 215-765-9040 or go to [pcaCares.org](http://pcaCares.org) and click on "Services for Seniors," then "Senior Centers."

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