

Active for Life brings research to community settings

offered through the OASIS Institute in San Antonio, Texas. He used goal-setting techniques to help him focus his activity regimen, and applied tools to help track his activity levels and remain motivated. The self-described former *couch potato* set a goal of a daily 2.5-mile walk at a 16 minute per mile pace—a goal he has achieved.

Bald even managed to surprise Tracy Slate, coordinator of the San Antonio Active for Life program, by joining her for the weekly group ride of the Hill Country Bicycle Touring Club—EZ Riders. The 76 year-old Bald had not ridden his bicycle any significant distance in more than 15 years, but he completed the entire 29-mile ride with no assistance.

According to Bald, one of the toughest things was simply to start being active after years of sedentary behavior, during which time he watched his weight balloon to 274 pounds.

“You have to get yourself to admit you have a choice to make,” says Bald. “You can stay sedentary and face the consequences, like going into a nursing home, or you can decide to do what you can to keep yourself healthy and independent.” He now tips the scales at 240 pounds, and still works to trim his weight through exercise and improved eating habits.

Taking aim at 50-plus adults’ low activity levels

Supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and healthcare, the Active for Life initiative seeks to increase the number of midlife and older American adults who meet the Surgeon General’s recommendation for physical activity. The program is administered by the Active for Life national program office, housed at the School of Rural Public

Health of the Texas A&M University System Health Science Center.

Active for Life is designed to learn how to accomplish two vital goals:

- Deliver research-based physical activity programs to large numbers of midlife and older adults; and
- Sustain such programs through existing community institutions, such as health, social, community, aging, religious or recreational centers and agencies.

One significant challenge for the program is its target audience: healthy, but sedentary, people ages 50 and older.

RWJF Senior Program Officer Robin Mockenhaupt says the foundation funded the four-year Active for Life program as part of its efforts to better understand how to motivate adults to become physically active. The initiative is one of several programs in the RWJF family of Active Living grants.

“We recognized that older people are one of the most sedentary segments of the population,” says Mockenhaupt, citing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that show more than 25% of adults ages 50–64 and 33% of those ages 65 and older engage in no leisure time physical activity. “We wanted to take two interventions...that have worked in research settings,” she explains, “and see if these models can be successfully implemented and sustained in community settings.”

For its interventions, RWJF chose *Active Living Every Day*, a group-based model developed by the Cooper Institute and Human Kinetics, and *Active Choices*, a telephone-based model developed at the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention. Active for Life is testing both programs, with the aim of helping community organizations teach older



This initiative is testing ways to deliver physical activity programs and messages to midlife and older adults in the community

by Brigid McHugh Sanner

This article marks the first in a series of profiles on the 2003 ICAA Industry Innovators Award winners. Presented by the International Council on Active Aging, these awards honor excellence and creativity in the health and wellness field, and recognize organizations that have created cutting-edge physical activity programs for adults ages 50 and older.

Jim Bald is one of the many success stories emerging from the 12 communities throughout the United States where Active for Life® programs were launched in early 2003. (A list of community sites participating in this initiative appears on page 58.)

Jim Bald was sedentary when he signed up for the Active for Life program

adults how to set personal activity goals and address barriers that might hinder engagement in regular physical activity. The program takes into account consideration for individual interests and functional abilities, as well as social and environmental issues. RWJF is also looking at the impact of community design and related environmental factors on physical activity.

Mockenhaupt indicates that results from the Active for Life program will help set the agenda for future physical activity programs targeted to older people.

Stimulating interest in fitness for older adults

Almost 500 community-based organizations applied for nine grants when the Active for Life national program office issued a funding call for proposal (CFP). “Just by putting out the CFP we raised awareness of the importance of physical activity for elders,” says Marcia G. Ory, who directs the program.

According to Ory, Active for Life has stimulated community organizations to get interested and involved in working with midlife and older adults. “A year after the CFP was released,” she says, “we find that some organizations that were not funded have been so motivated by the concept that they have implemented elements of the program on their own.” Currently, the national program office is looking for ways to give technical assistance not only to the nine funded grantees, but also to other community-based organizations that want to deliver physical activity programming to midlife and older people.

With an independent evaluation being conducted by the University of South Carolina Prevention Research Center, the program’s formal results and published findings may be a long way

off. But already practical lessons are coming through (see “Active for Life: 10 lessons to take away” on page 59).

Ory points out three elements that characterize successful programs to date:

- To reach a broad audience of midlife and older people, grantees have learned they need to forge solid working partnerships with multiple community service organizations.
- In some cases, grantees have found their initial efforts successfully reach the more active 50-plus adults, says Ory, but it is much more challenging to reach and recruit people who are inactive.
- Grantees are learning how to apply behavioral principles to motivate people to start and continue physical activity programs. A key element is working with individuals to have them set and monitor their goals. It is important to help people recognize individual, social and environmental barriers to being more active, and to engage actively in solutions to address these barriers.

“Many older adults are interested in physical activity,” says Martha Milk, project director for the San Mateo County Active for Life program, “but they need a gradual start-up program—one that does not set an expectation like *We want you walking really fast within six months.*” Milk says that being able to walk unassisted would be a big accomplishment for some older adults. And she also notes a need for strength, balance and flexibility programs.

The YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago’s Jan Arnold says the people interested in Active for Life in the Y’s service area are not the older spectrum of the community. According to Arnold, the Chicago area Y has effectively recruited people in their 50s and 60s, most of whom still

work. The organization has been using step counters as a means of motivation and measurement for participants. Interestingly, “[s]tep counting is a great motivator for some, but a hassle for others,” Arnold remarks.

The Y is starting to implement strategies to engage people in their mid-60s and older. And Arnold expects an interesting time learning about this group’s attitudes and beliefs about physical activity. It is hoped outcomes will help the Y develop new programming for people with different physical functioning levels.

Communicating with the 50-plus audiences

The Active for Life national program office and AARP, a nonprofit membership organization for age 50-plus adults, are collaborating on social marketing work that will ultimately lead to more effective communication with midlife and older adults. The RWJF-funded work has the following aims:

- To test the promotion and dissemination of messages and materials about physical activity; and
- To enhance understanding about how to reach and influence 50-plus adults with messages related to becoming more physically active.

“The formula for effective communications can be deceptively simple,” says Joseph F. Marx, RWJF senior communications officer. “You need to clearly define your audience, carefully develop and test messages targeted to the audience, identify the appropriate media channels, and evaluate as you go.” Marx adds, “Above all else, keep your *AIM*—your Audience In Mind.”

Active for Life grantees are finding that their audiences of midlife and older adults are enormously diverse. For

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example, the Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio is implementing the program in a region with a population base ranging from the metropolitan area of Cincinnati to rural agricultural areas. The organization's challenge is to develop messages and outreach that appeal to this spectrum of regional demographics.

Deborah Primrose Kosmont, supervisor of the Active for Life project at Blue Shield of California, says, "The population we are trying to reach is extremely heterogeneous. Readiness to change, motivations, preferences and behaviors of potential participants vary dramatically, requiring different messaging to specific and targeted sub-groups within the broader population." She acknowledges that this can be "a resource-intensive strategy," but considers it necessary to recruit and retain participants.

Serving vital roles

As year one of Active for Life winds down, Diane Dowdy, deputy director of the program, says a great deal has been learned about how to market information to new and diverse populations, as well as how important it is to tailor materials. In addition, the need to link people with opportunities to engage in preferred activities and to identify community resources is vital to getting older people more active.

"You can never underestimate the need for additional community education to help people maintain active lives," says Lisa Hartsock, administrative director of Active for Life at FirstHealth of the Carolinas.

Perhaps 58 year-old Barbara Dice, a graduate of FirstHealth's Active for Life program, can best sum up its benefits. Says Dice, "I work in a long-term care facility and see that those adults who are physically active and keep a positive attitude are those who face the losses

associated with aging much better." The resident of Pinehurst, North Carolina, continues, "The potential to reduce your chances of being bedridden or in a wheelchair by adopting the Active for Life strategies has had a profound impact on me." According to Dice, she joined the program because it is different from the typical self-help or exercise program. "This isn't a one or two session *We're going to fix you up and send you out and everything is going to be OK* program," she says. "This is truly a lifestyle change." ▼

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Active for Life community sites

The two Active for Life interventions, Active Living Every Day and Active Choices, are being tested in 12 community settings throughout the United States.

Active Living Every Day was developed by behavioral scientists and interventionists at the Cooper Institute and Human Kinetics. This comprehensive, group-based behavior change program is based on extensive research that shows teaching people lifestyle skills helps them become and stay physically active.

Active Living Every Day is being tested at the following sites:

- Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio (Cincinnati, Ohio)
- FirstHealth of the Carolinas (Pinehurst, North Carolina)
- Greater Detroit Area Health Council (Detroit, Michigan)

- Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington (Rockville, Maryland)
- OASIS Institute (St. Louis, Missouri) with programs in Pittsburgh, San Antonio and St. Louis

Active Choices is an individually tailored, telephone-supervised program that provides instruction, feedback and support to participants. This intervention is based on 20 years of systematic research and evaluation by public health researchers and community intervention specialists at the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention.

Active Choices is being tested at the following sites:

- Blue Shield of California (Woodland Hills, California)
- Church Health Center of Memphis (Memphis, Tennessee)
- San Mateo County Health Services (San Mateo, California) with programs in San Mateo County and Berkeley
- YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago (Chicago, Illinois)



Active for Life: 10 lessons to take away

1. **Most older adults recognize the importance of physical activity.**

What older adults need is the information, resources, guidance, support and encouragement to help them get active.

2. **Start-up takes time.**

The launch of a new program aimed at reaching new audiences takes time. Factors include planning, organization and recruitment. In addition, health and wellness professionals must consider the fact that some older adults may need more staff time and support. When staff invest this time with them, people build a sense of confidence and comfort.

3. **There is power in partnerships.**

An effective outreach to midlife and older people works best when guided by multiple community organizations that have established leadership and earned the trust of their communities.

4. **One size does not fit all.**

Physical activity preferences and abilities vary widely among the 50-plus audience. For some people, walking

independently for 30 minutes, five or more days each week, is an incredible milestone. For others, a *stretch goal* may mean expanding an occasional workout into a regular part of their daily routine. Some individuals prefer to be active with a friend; some find a solitary walk relaxing. Some people like aerobics and yoga; some prefer bicycling and tai chi. Tapping into individual preferences helps build solid programs that attract 50-plus adults.

5. **Audiences are diverse.**

Adults ages 50 and older are defined by characteristics that go beyond the basic demographic markers, i.e. gender, age, race, education and income. When developing programs, health and wellness professionals need to consider people's values, beliefs and attitudes, as well as life and cultural experiences.

6. **Targeted communications are critical.**

The effective development and delivery of health messages and related communications initiatives require creativity. Besides the obvious challenge of working with limited budgets, organizations need to understand the media habits that influence health behaviors (see "Cutting through media clutter: five rules for communicating more effectively" on page 44 for more information). In addition, they also need to take into account such issues as reading levels and language. (Check out "Are your written materials missing the mark?" in the *Journal on Active Aging's* July/August 2003 issue for more

about age-appropriate materials.)

7. **Flexibility is important.**

When developing community-based initiatives and working with multiple groups, the ability to adapt to opportunities and barriers as they arise helps pave the way for success.

8. **Success has many faces.**

People view success in many ways. Participants may see success as achieving fitness goals, making new friends or just getting out of the house regularly. Health and wellness professionals may measure success by the number of people in a program, improvements in participants' functionality, or health changes such as weight loss or high blood pressure control. There are probably few *bad* measures of success. But, however you measure success, it is important to recognize achievements.

9. **It's a learning process.**

Mistakes happen, but they should not derail a program. Errors should serve as tools to help modify and enhance the effort.

10. **Learn from each other.**

Many health and wellness professionals, organizations, agencies and associations are interested in increasing the physical activity levels of older adults. A great way to leverage limited resources and maximize results is to share information, lessons learned and tools through formal or informal coalitions or learning networks.