

Day of Dedication

Adult day health programs bring creativity, flexibility to serving diverse clients and needs.

by Bonnie Allen

Adult day programs are among the most flexible and creative senior-services providers, often working wonders despite lack of funds or even dedicated spaces. Here is a look at a few adult day providers that show the range of possibilities in this part of the continuum.

One offers a mobile day program run by two employees who drive to rural senior centers to offer social-model services. Another provider has found a way to overcome its lack of a building by sharing space in a church, and involves university students in offering services to seniors. Another shares space with a Head Start program and offers services to younger adults with disabilities as well as seniors. A fourth offers “ability-oriented” therapeutic art, gardening and baking programs.

Like sturdy undergrowth in an old forest, adult day programs are invigorating the senior services continuum. Under sometimes challenging conditions, creative, mission-driven providers have anchored successful programs in the appreciative communities they serve.

Where There's a Will, There's a Place

Day service centers are thriving in a wide range of settings.

Kathryn Fowler, executive director of the Athens Community Council on Aging in Georgia, is acquainted with both ends of the spectrum of facilities. She was involved in research and planning of a center recently built in Athens. Its attractive features—clerestory windows, a glass wall looking onto an enclosed garden, cushioned non-slip flooring, a beauty parlor and spa, large bathrooms accessible for bathing and numerous activity areas—add up to a safe, efficient and beautiful environment for participants and staff.

At the same time, the council sponsors mobile adult day services using space borrowed from senior centers in five predominantly rural counties. Eve Anthony, director of adult day health services, supervises two staff members—a coordinator and a certified nurse assistant—who leave their homes each morning in cars packed with charts and other paperwork, activity supplies, snacks and more, to work in a different center each day of the week.

The Life Adult Day Center, Stillwater, Okla., copes creatively with its own space issues. Lacking a building, the center oversees a program that operates five days a week in the First Christian Church of Stillwater. The program has expanded from serving five participants in one room of the church's educational building to serving 40 in seven rooms.

Walter Reggie Norris and Frances Karl Vinson, clients of the Athens Community Council on Aging, share a laugh. The organization operates a permanent center in Athens, Ga., but also takes its services on the road, sending staff to five rural counties to run adult day programs in space borrowed from senior centers.



Athens Community Council on Aging

“The success is in the doing, not necessarily in the finished product, but the finished product is extraordinarily beautiful.”

On weekdays, a preschool occupies one half of the building, the day center the other half. Meals ordered from an outside service are served in a kitchen and dining area.

On Fridays, the staff must transform their space before going home. They take down tables and set chairs in position for the church’s weekend activities. All the wheelchairs, blackboards and activity supplies are moved into the one area dedicated solely to the day program, a large room also used for five staff desks. On Monday morning, three staff members move everything back into place for the new week.

In Cranston, R.I., Hope Alzheimer’s Center operates in a homelike yellow clapboard building often visited by professionals studying models of design for dedicated day health centers. The medical service and personal care facilities, cheerful rooms, bright kitchen, patio and raised garden beds provide an ideal therapeutic environment.

Everyone Deserves to Have a Good Day

These programs serve populations with varied needs, and some combine groups that have very different requirements.

Hope Alzheimer’s Center provides a high level of medical and personal care services to people with multiple health issues, all with progressive memory loss. The Athens Council programs in Athens and Winder provide medical monitoring and personal services including bathing, while their mobile service is a social model program, serving up to eight participants each day who have physical or cognitive limitations and need assistance with one or two daily living activities.

At Life Adult Day Center, half the participants have cognitive impairment. They often begin the day with guided conversation about the season and other topics that engage them in reality. In another room, those who have physical impairments but are cognitively alert talk over the day’s headlines in a news orientation group. Later, the groups may join in musical activities, lunch or special events.

Erica Drewry, executive director of Heritage Day Health Centers in Columbus, Ohio, oversees four centers where 60 percent of the participants have memory loss and 40 percent are cognitively alert but have disabilities or chronic health issues. One center is shared with a Head Start program and another houses “Transitions,” a day program for younger adults over age 21 who are disabled by traumatic brain injuries, heart attacks or other illnesses.

Drewry says, “The point of ‘Transitions’ is to have a place where the younger adults can come together to feel productive, to have a social outlet. While some attend only briefly, others have been coming for as long as 20 years. They have a whole different set of challenges. Their developmental process is still in play. Some have families with children at home.”

Some center populations are quite homogeneous; others, like that of Heritage Centers, comprise a wide range of ethnicities. Drewry says, “We embrace every culture, celebrate every holiday.

There may be other issues, perhaps a religious background that doesn’t condone dancing. We make certain there are three or four activities at a time going on, so there’s always something for someone.”

Creative Providers Leave No Opportunity Behind


These resourceful providers enrich their programs by taking full advantage of possibilities inside and outside their facilities.

Drewry views sharing space with Head Start children or young disabled adults as an opportunity for many intergenerational activities—sing-alongs, balloon volleyball with kids and adults on the same team or theme-oriented events such as circuses. She points out that the centers have a big impact on clients’ nutrition.

Marketing Adult Day Services to Physicians

One important strategy for spreading the word about adult day services is making sure physicians know about your services and refer families to you. Many physicians are not aware of what services are available to benefit their patients and family caregivers.

Here are some keys to marketing to physicians:

- Make the referral process user-friendly by giving doctors referral pads with contact information for your program. Encourage them to keep the referral pads in their exam rooms and offices.
- Schedule individual meetings with physicians to inform them of your services. Offer brief case studies of how your program has helped older adults and people with disabilities as well as family caregivers. Show them photos of your program, and give them a list of medical services, personal care services and social activities you provide.
- Ask if nurses and office managers can be included in the meeting.
- Focus first on physicians who specialize in geriatrics, family practice, internal medicine and neurology.
- Ask if you can place your program’s brochures in their waiting rooms.
- After a physician’s patient has entered your adult day program, send a thank-you note to the physician, mentioning any positive effects your program has had on the participant. 

For a sample referral slip, contact Peter Notarstefano, AAHSA’s director of home and community-based services, at pnotarstefano@aahsa.org or (202) 508-9406.

“We often hear from caregivers things like, ‘I left a sandwich for Mom at home, but she didn’t eat it.’ Eating is such a social activity ... they eat more here than they might when they’re alone.”

Life Adult Day Center partners with Oklahoma State University and its work/study students in a speech therapy program, plus water therapy in the university’s pool. Students earn credits, and life at the center is enriched, says Jane Carlson, executive director.

Cynthia Conant-Arp, executive director of Hope Alzheimer’s Center, says, “At Hope Center, we are constantly trying to build that bridge to the person who’s trapped inside, to their life history, and we preserve what we can for as long as possible. We’re very much ability-oriented instead of disability-oriented, and that gives a whole different focus to a person’s dignity.”

Describing the center’s therapeutic arts program, Conant-Arp says, “The success is in the doing, not necessarily in the finished product, but the finished product is extraordinarily beautiful.”

A gallery in Providence showed the participants’ paintings and pottery, and *Medicine and Health Rhode Island*, a medical journal, reproduced a painting on its cover. At an annual fundraising event, the artwork and note cards featuring reproductions of participants’ paintings are big sellers.

Baking is popular among both men and women, even those who never considered themselves bakers before. The participants bake dog biscuits for a dog pound and, once a month, provide goodies for a community theatre. Participants also grow vegetables in the raised gardens for a food pantry, sometimes with the help of Boy Scouts and young people from a nearby school.



Hope Alzheimer’s Center

Kenneth Crook (center), works with Hope Alzheimer’s Center clients Mary Meiller and Cosmo Montaquila. Crook, a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, leads the center’s therapeutic art program.

Success Happens in the Middle Of Somewhere

Like Hope Alzheimer’s Center, these other adult day programs form part of the living fabric of the broader life around them. Good community relations are essential to their success.

Especially at start-up, these providers see the need to introduce the concept of adult day services. They have sent out press releases, created demonstration videos, spoken to service organizations and church coffee groups—anyone who would listen.

Anthony of Athens Community Council on Aging says, “In starting our mobile service, we talked with the people at the senior centers a lot in the beginning. It wasn’t always smooth. They were concerned with our taking up their space. They would have to cook more meals. But there is a learning curve. Once we had done it long enough, the other counties began to clamor for the service.”

Public relations success was evident when one county built a new senior center, and its staff advocated for renovating a small building for the day program and connecting it to the new one.

This dedicated space gives the mobile staffers a base and creates the possibility of expanding services there to more than one day a week.

At Life Adult Day Center, Carlson is gratefully aware that First Christian Church views housing the center as a mission, even though the program is not religiously affiliated. She does not begrudge the effort involved in sharing space. “We paid nothing in rent for years; now we are paying only \$450 a month. We view it as a partnership. We have shared costs for new appliances, carpeting and lighting. Families and friends of participants who have passed away have contributed to a walkway, benches, a patio—things which benefit the church as well as us.”

When the center appealed to the community of Stillwater to help fund a van, one mailing resulted in donations totaling \$46,000.

Word-of-mouth and interaction with volunteers are important forms of outreach for all the centers, but providers find many other ways of keeping community connections alive.

Conant-Arp says, “We target efforts to educate people in the community. For example, with the families’ permission, we regularly tell physicians of our clients how they are doing, what activities they enjoy. And our clients give them their products—the beautiful note cards, a plate of cookies.”

Appreciation Is the Bread of Work Life for Staff

Although budgets are tight and salaries generally low, staff retention rates are high. Perhaps the most important incentive is the

feedback from appreciative families and participants. Comments such as “This center has meant happiness for Dad and peace of mind for the family” and “Mother is beginning to blossom” are typical.

Conant-Arp says, “Every staff member feels on a daily basis they make a difference. We engage staff in our care plan. We try to reward through education, respect, thank you’s. We now have a small budget for token staff gifts—perhaps a coffee shop card. For something extraordinary we may give an extra day off with pay.”


Drewry says, “Employees who come to us from nursing homes are especially appreciative of our regular hours, and having holidays off. Weekend work is voluntary. Another plus is that they see the impact of what they’re doing every moment of every day—to have a family member say, ‘This place has saved my life!’ There’s a lot of payback.”

For the mobile center staff in Georgia, both of whom have worked for several years, the independence and variety of driving to a different center each day is part of their job satisfaction.

At Life Adult Center, Carlson stresses cross-training and communication as sources of contentment for staff. “All of our people are generalists. Everybody does everything, so no one feels isolated in their work. When I hire a CNA to help primarily with personal care, that person knows all the other staff members are trained to do this, too—that they all understand it’s an important job.”

Carlson and the five full-time staff who have paperwork responsibilities have their desks in one large room. “For communication, it can’t be beat. It’s like having a staff meeting every day. I cannot imagine running a center and being in a little office by myself.”

Dedication Is the Gold Standard

Adult day service programs add cost-effective flexibility to the senior care continuum. At a time when rising costs and government cutbacks threaten not-for-profit services, many dedicated day service providers are proving that inspiration and ingenuity are powerful assets. 

Bonnie Allen is a writer who lives in Reston, Va.

Resources

Athens Community Council on Aging, Athens, Ga.

Contact: Kathryn D. Fowler, executive director, kfowler@accaging.org or (706) 549-4850.

Heritage Day Health Centers, Columbus, Ohio.

Contact: Erica Drewry, executive director, edrewry@heritagedayhealth.org or (614) 236-0586.

Hope Alzheimer’s Center, Cranston, R.I.

Contact: Cynthia Conant-Arp, executive director, cconantarp@hopealzheimerscenter.org or (401) 946-9220.

Life Adult Day Center, Stillwater, Okla.

Contact: Jane Carlson, executive director, lifecenter@brightok.net or (405) 377-0978.