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## Sustaining and Increasing Participation of Rural Seniors in a Senior Center

MICHELLE L. FONTAINE  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Michelle Fontaine

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Karel Kurst-Swanger, Committee Chairperson, Public Policy and Administration  
Faculty

Dr. Kristin Dailey, Committee Member, Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Sustaining and Increasing Participation of Rural Seniors in a Senior Center

by

Michelle L. Fontaine, Ph.D.

PhD, Walden University, 2017

MA, Seton Hill University, 2010

BS, University of New England, 1999

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

This case study's objective was to sustain and increase senior participation in senior center activities by examining the rural senior perception of environmental needs and support of a local senior center. Senior centers assist with aging in place well and aid seniors to be socially active within their communities. Much of the literature around senior centers has focused on urban environments and not on the specific needs of the rural senior. In this study, 24 individuals were interviewed. The questions examined the seniors' perception about the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to meet their physical and social needs using the person environment fit theory (PE-Fit theory). PE-Fit affects the perceptions and behaviors of the person, which influences whether individuals participate in senior center activities. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using NVivo software searching for themes. The main themes were centered around activities expected at a senior center such as meals, games, and discussion groups. Themes around barriers were transportation, time, and health issues. These themes were used to recommend strategies and guidelines for increasing senior participation in senior centers. Documents including the Facebook page, informative emails, flyers, and policies were analyzed for themes, components, accessibility, and functionality. The analysis provided guidelines for senior centers to better fit their environments to the unique needs of rural seniors. Furthermore, understanding how rural seniors feel that they fit into an environment, and what they perceive their needs are, aids in the development of supportive strategies from other community-based organizations to assist older adults to live and function better within their community which leads to positive social change.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to all seniors; you all shine brighter than any star. We will never know the whole that you have been through, but we see you and your value.

Specifically, my mother who is considered a senior, has always been involved in her community by being on various committees and was a volunteer paramedic for over 20 years. These days she is attending a senior center and is on its board of directors. She is part of the Lion's Club, the local historical society as the president, and serves on many committees within the town. Always inspiring and always supportive.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband, mother, and sister for their never-ending support. A very special thank you to Deb C. without whom I would have lost my mind working on this project.

Thank you to Donna G. and the rest of the senior center who all were so excited for me to work with them. You folks are all wonderful, I am grateful to learn more about your thoughts for a better community. Together we can help others age in place well.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

### **Introduction**

This qualitative case study evaluated rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to sustain and increase participation. This evaluation affords valuable information to help the board of directors to create policies which will shape the environment of the center to best fit the needs of the Seniors. The Senior Center in this study is a fairly new center which incorporated and opened mid-2019 (Roberts, 2019). This study looks at the barriers to attending the center, perceptions of those who have and have not participated in the center, and how well the senior center meets the seniors' expectations. The analysis provides guidelines for similar organizations on how to better fit environments to the unique needs of rural seniors. Furthermore, understanding rural seniors' perceived needs and how they feel they fit into an environment aids other community-based organizations to assist older adults to live and function better within their community. This study expands the research on aging by examining the rural senior perception of environmental needs and support that allow them to age in place.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem the Senior Center wanted addressed was sustaining and increasing participation of seniors in its rural catchment area. The Center was incorporated as a nonprofit in 2019 (Eintaxid.com, 2019). The board of directors set up policies and guidelines as well as established a small base group of participants prior to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The doors of the Center were closed in early 2020 due to the

pandemic, but participants stayed in touch via phone calls (D. Griffin, personal communications, July 20, 2021). In late spring of 2021, they reopened the doors for physical get togethers. They have a base group of approximately a dozen seniors who get together weekly for crafts and games. In the town where the center is located, there are over 1,700 individuals aged 60 and older (Robbins, 2019). The Center not only serves the local town but several neighboring towns. The center has a potential to attract a larger percentage of the rural senior population and needs a plan to bring more seniors to Center activities.

There are many rural senior centers throughout the state which will benefit from the lessons learned through this case study. Each center will benefit from ideas to increase senior participation within their community.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to sustain and increase participation. This study explored how the center's environment could be shaped to better fit rural seniors' needs and expectations. Some gaps in organizational knowledge included understanding how the seniors view senior centers, how environmental barriers affect the seniors, and how to best attract seniors to the center.

### **Research Questions**

For those who participate at the Senior Center:

RQ1: How does the Senior Center fit the physical needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ2: How does the Senior Center fit the social needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ3: What attracts seniors who attend the center to the Senior Center?

For those who do not participate in a senior center (non-attending seniors):

RQ4: What are the impressions that non-attending seniors have of senior centers?

RQ5: What reasons do non-attending seniors give for not attending a senior center?

Exploring and documenting the needs and barriers from the point of view of rural seniors aided in addressing the gaps in the organization's knowledge. Individual interviews were conducted involving seniors who attend the center and local seniors who do not attend the center. These interviews addressed how best to fit the senior center to the needs of the seniors. Workable solutions were made with the insights gleaned during the study. Recommendations for changes in organizational policy, marketing strategies, and community-based solutions were presented to the senior center board of directors in order to help sustain and increase participation in the center.

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative case study explored a single nonprofit rural Senior Center and the local seniors' perceptions of the center as well as the fit between the center and the unique needs of the seniors. Data was collected through individual interviews (Mize & Rose, 2019). The data source for this study was participant responses to qualitative semi structured, open-ended interview questions presented to individuals 60 and older. These questions were designed to facilitate an open dialog with participants during their

interviews, encouraging them to describe their experiences with the senior center as well as to find out what may keep them from participating in the center.

Documents including the Facebook page, informative emails, flyers, and policies were collected. These were analyzed for themes, components, accessibility, and functionality. The analysis of the documents aided in triangulating information gained from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). The data were run through NVivo to find themes. A visual analysis was conducted to evaluate the eye-catching components and completeness of the data in the documents.

The qualitative data was collected from transcribed interviews, using NVivo software to identify themes in participant perceptions and understandings related to the environment of the center and any barriers to attending the center which may be unique to the rural area. The purpose of this study was to identify and improve the participation of seniors in the rural senior center to help the organization better accomplish their mission.

### **Significance**

This study explored the perceptions of rural seniors of the local Senior Center including barriers to attending the center, the center environment, and how well the center met the needs of the rural seniors. This exploration included considering the whole situation when determining a good fit for an individual (Lewin,1951). This study compared the individual's needs with the center's environment. Fong et al. (2021) stated that for older adults to successfully age in place, their participation in activities outside their own home, are important to their physical and mental well-being. By participating



in a senior center, seniors increase their social support and decrease ill effects of isolation that may occur when aging in place without any social activities. Negative effects of isolation may include depression and deterioration of physical and mental health. Therefore, determining the barriers to rural seniors' participation in the senior center is significant for the overall well-being of elderly adults who are aging in place. This study will assist other rural senior centers to be aware of the barriers involved with increasing and sustaining senior participation.

### **Summary**

Section 1 documented and introduced the problem of a rural Senior Center in increasing and sustaining participation of local seniors. The significance of this study as well as the potential contributions and implications were introduced. In Section 2, existing scholarly literature is introduced to address potential barriers in and the need for center participation. The study adds to that literature and a broader context which surrounds the unique issues rural senior centers must address.

## Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

### Introduction

This qualitative case study examined the perceived functionality and accessibility of the center as interpreted by seniors attending the center as well as seniors who do not attend the center. To explore this issue, the following questions guided the individual interviews:

For those who participate at the Senior Center:

RQ1: How does the Senior Center fit the physical needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ2: How does the Senior Center fit the social needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ3: What attracts seniors who attend the center to the Senior Center?

For those who do not participate in a senior center (nonattending seniors):

RQ4: What are the impressions that non-attending seniors have of senior centers?

RQ5: What reasons do non-attending seniors give for not attending a senior center?

The theoretical concept and framework for this study used the person-environment fit (PE-Fit) theory which examines the rural seniors' perceptions of the centers fit to their needs. According to PE-Fit theory, an individual's needs and behaviors affect their environment and the environment in turn affects their behaviors (Ouyang, 2018). These behavioral and environmental changes affect how the senior participates in the center. This section gives in-depth information into the PE-Fit theory as well as the

background information on seniors and the need for participation in a senior center. This section discusses the PE-Fit theory, how it relates to the senior's and their perspectives, why senior centers are relevant to public organizations, the Senior Center's history, and the background of senior centers.

### **Concepts, Models, and Theories**

The PE-Fit Theory has had a strong basis in psychology for many decades. Lewin (1951) discussed behavior as being a function of the person and environmental factors. Lawton and Simon (1968) built on this concept with their belief that a person will adapt their environment to fit their needs as well as adapt their behaviors to fit the environment. They further examined the person environment interface for older adults who cannot minimize the barriers of their environment. Seniors must factor in new barriers such as health, cognitive, social, or personal factors as they interact with their environment (Lien et al., 2015). In a Swedish study by Iwarsson (2005), the activities of daily living (ADL) were examined using PE-Fit theory. Iwarsson (2005) found that as the person aged, their functionality decreased, and their environment needed to change to accommodate the issues that arose. Therefore, PE-Fit needs to be reevaluated throughout the aging process.

For older adults who are aging in place, not only is their home environment important but they also need to find leisure activities that fit their social needs. These leisure activities are usually within community-based environments which are considered crucial for the older population to age in place (Fong et al., 2021). By staying involved with the surrounding community the individual can better meet their social needs (Fong et al., 2021). The social well-being of the individual is an important factor in their

physical and mental health. Kahana et al. (1980) described the expectations of the environment as fulfilling the need to create a comfortable place for the individual to socialize and interact. Therefore, aging in place encompasses more than just being able to stay in their own home but includes how well they can interact with their community.

Cvitkovich and Wister (2001) looked at 4 PE-Fit models to determine which model was the best predictor of value of life with a senior population. These models were based on Lewin's (1951) first models on the function of PE-Fit. Lawton, Carp, and Kahana all incorporated Lewin's original PE-Fit theory to better understand the situational environment and the way seniors perceive and interact with it (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). As defined below, the four models of the PE-Fit theory are competence, complementary/congruence, priority, and weighted priority (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001; Ouyang, 2018).

Lewin (1951) considered behavior to be a function of the appraisal process and interaction within the environment. The appraisal process includes personal characteristics or traits combined with present and past life experiences and perceived environmental characteristics. All of these come together in an appraisal process creating an interaction or behavior within the environment.

From Lewin's first steps with creating PE-Fit theory, several others took the theory and used it in two distinct approaches: competence and congruence. Lawton and Nahemow (1973) took a competence approach where the behavior of the individual relates to how well they work within the environment. Kahana (1982) and Carp and Carp (1984) used a congruence approach where the behavior is a result of how well the

environment meets the needs of the individual. In 1987, Lawton shifts the competence model to include a look at personal resources versus environmental resources to understand how the person and environment fit together (Parmelee & Lawton, 1990). Personal and environmental resources support the individual as they age even though the barriers to fitting an environment change. Gerontological application of PE-Fit theory sits within the purview of a person coping within an environment as their abilities decline due to age or disability (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). Therefore, researchers must examine both environmental and personal barriers and supports when looking at seniors participating in a rural senior center.

Kahana (1975) discussed that not all barriers can be weighted the same; the need for better understanding is knowing which areas are the most salient. There is a priority of needs which each individual must assess when looking at an environment. This study shows which barriers are the most important to the seniors.

The competence model is about the environmental pressure which is the difference between the needs of the individual and what the environment provides (Ouyang, 2018). Too much environmental pressure will suppress the individual whereas slight environmental pressure will motivate the individual. The slight pressure keeps the individual from being bored and helps them stay engaged. The two components in the competence model are personal competence and environmental stress. Environmental stress is the social and physical challenges presented by the environment (Parmelee & Lawton, 1990). Personal competence is how well the individual can adapt to the environment (Lawton, 1975). The competence model emphasizes the adverse conditions

or barriers of the environment and how the individual can force changes to the environment through needs and behaviors (Carp & Carp, 1984). The crux of the competence model is that if the environment does not meet the persons' needs their wellbeing is adversely affected (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001).

The complementary/congruence model looks at the difference between the needs of the individual and the support available within the environment (Carp & Carp, 1984). When there is a higher fit between individuals needs and environmental support the individual perceives satisfaction with the environment. However, if the individual struggles with the basic ADL then their perceived satisfaction with the environment decreases unless the environment increases the support needed for the individual (Carp & Carp, 1984). This model relies on the autonomy of the individual and their perception of the environment meeting their needs. Perceived unmet needs along with the personal and environmental supports predict well-being with this model (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). For example, Park et al. (2017), used PE-Fit theory to examine aging in place for low-income seniors who stayed in their own homes and those who moved into senior housing facilities. They found that low-income seniors aged in place better when they moved to a senior housing facility due to the support systems already in place. Therefore, looking at support on a personal level as well as in the environment is an important aspect for determining the fit of the person and the environment.

The priority model looks at all the unmet needs within the environment, prioritizes them based on subjective significance (Ouyang, 2018). This model has a strong reliance on the individual's ability to cope with specific barriers within the

environment (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). For example, two seniors may each have transportation issues; one may find that it is a huge barrier, and the second senior may find ways to cope with the barrier by asking for a ride. Lien et al. (2015), looked at PE-Fit theory and aging in place through the lens of an occupational therapist. They explored the accessibility and adaptability of the home environment for the individual. They found that objective accessibility did not reflect the barriers priority as well as the individual's subjective perception.

The weighted priority model considers the individual's prioritization when determining higher and lower levels of need (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001). The primary assumption of the priority model is that not all needs carry the same weight. The weighted priority model takes in the priority of a need, amplifies the weight of the need, and incorporates the supports available (Ouyang, 2018). For example, if the individual is wheelchair bound then the need for a wheelchair ramp into the facility is weighted higher than the need for a coffee maker. Therefore, the weighted priority is the best indicator for personal well-being.

This study primarily uses the complementary/congruence model of PE-Fit Theory. This gives an understanding of how the senior perceives the fit of the senior center to their physical and social needs. Priority and weighted priority models of the PE-Fit theory are used as a secondary model to rank the importance of certain themes brought up by the seniors during individual interviews. For example, while coding if there is a change of tone or an emotional response this may indicate that the coded text/theme should carry more weight than something mentioned without an emotional

response. These codes and themes are flagged as being of more importance to the seniors (see Appendix A).

PE-Fit theory generally focuses on the needs of the person and how well the environment fits those needs. The fit between person and environment is of a supplementary nature, indicating that the needs and wants of the person can be fulfilled by the environment (Cable & Edwards, 2004). For example, if the person loves book clubs and the center has a book club then the center would be supplying the service to fit the person's needs. Thus, the wants and needs of their members are an important focus for the Senior Center to consider to best fit the unique needs of their clientele.

### **Relevance to Public Organizations**

In the United States of America, people over 65 make up approximately 16% (54.1 million) of the population (Administration for Community Living, 2021). It is estimated by 2040 that the over-65 demographic will rise to nearly 22% (Administration for Community Living, 2021). Maine has the oldest median population with people over 65 making up 21.1% (US Census Bureau, 2019a). Nearly 90% of seniors want to age in place, staying in their own homes (Aging in Place, 2021).

Successful aging is not just about living life on your own terms in your own home, but includes maintaining relationships, staying involved with the community, keeping mentally, spiritually, and physically healthy (Pfeiffer, 2013). There are several factors which influence successful aging in place which include the physical environment, health behaviors, clinical care, and social & economic factors (MacKinney et al., 2019). Many of these factors can be accomplished with visits to healthcare



providers, helpful devices, and visiting caregivers (Aging in Place, 2021). One of the social factors for aging in place is an individual's engagement in social interactions.

Social interaction is an important part of mental and physical wellbeing. Components of social interaction include information/knowledge sharing, instrumental/material support, spiritual and emotional support, and appraisal/behavior support (Bakhshandeh et al, 2021). A lack of these components could lead to reduced health information, isolation, decreased healthcare, and many other issues. Social interaction includes formal and informal components. Formal social interaction includes organizations which have policies or laws that mandate spiritual or material support to individuals such as van rides to doctor appointments (Lu et al., 2020). Informal social interaction not only includes friends and family but also organizations such as senior centers (Lu et al., 2020). Informal social interactions usually include emotional, behavioral, and informational components (Bai et al., 2020). Rural areas tend to have few formal interactive opportunities and informal interactive opportunities are not readily available.

In rural areas there are many barriers to successful aging in place. Factors include lower income, less access to health and mental healthcare, food insecurities, transportation issues, lack of adequate internet and cellular infrastructure, and geographic isolation (Webster Fink & Jacobs, 2017). These factors lead to physical and social isolation. Seniors prefer to stay where they raised their children and know their community (Weirich & Benson, 2019). Often rural communities lack resources seniors need to successfully age in place (Weirich & Benson, 2019). The insider vs. outsider

barrier arises when these resilient, independent people are uncomfortable with strangers (Zanjani & Rowles, 2012). Rural seniors will freely communicate with people they share a history with but tend to shut down with outsiders (Zanjani & Rowles, 2012). Local gathering places such as senior centers, which are run by local communities and have local seniors attending, help to create comfortable safe environments where rural seniors gather and openly discuss issues.

Senior centers facilitate social interactions as well as a diversity of services and programs promoting the overall wellbeing of seniors (Colistra et al., 2017). The social interactions senior centers can offer include knowledge sharing, emotional support, appraisal of individual function as compared to peers, and ride sharing opportunities (Bakhshandeh et al, 2021). Another benefit of attending a senior center is the increase of physical activity beyond the senior's current activity level (Marquet et al., 2020). For some, simply adding the activity of traveling to the center is an increase. However, many centers offer different physical fitness activities such as yoga, stretching, dancing and cardio type activities (Marquet et al., 2020).

There are four basic models for senior centers (Keller, 2017). The Café model is a multipurpose center where seniors gather for tea, coffee, and a variety of activities (Keller, 2017). The activities give opportunities for social interaction, education, and physical exercise. This type of model focuses on social interaction and community involvement. The second model is the technology model (Keller, 2017). This model offers daily call-in opportunities and virtual programs. These programs can include on-line social times, educational meetings, planning meetings, or even online games. This

model is beneficial when it is impossible to meet face to face due to barriers such as health, transportation, lack of time, or pandemics. This model requires some technical skills but is an excellent way to continue with social bonding and social interaction when face-to-face interaction is impossible. The third model is life-long learning (Keller, 2017). This model focuses on mental health by encouraging continuing education, travel, hobby expansion, volunteering, and mentoring activities. The fourth model is fitness and wellness (Keller, 2017). This focuses on four basic areas of wellness: social, physical, spiritual, and mental. Social wellness includes social interactions such as game days and potluck meals. Physical wellness includes healthcare, exercise/fitness programs, and nutritional education. Spiritual wellness includes contributing to society, maintaining an optimistic point of view, and practicing selfcare (Smith, 2016). Mental wellness is taking care of intellectual needs as well as emotional and mental health.

Pardasani (2019) found that for 43% of interviewed Baby Boomers, they felt there was not a need for a senior center due to the great number of other service options they had in their community. However, in rural areas there is a lack of services which leads to many barriers to receiving services such as health care. Potential barriers for rural seniors attending senior centers are very similar to those barriers for accessing health care. For rural communities, transportation is always a challenge due to a lack of public transportation and distance factors (Dize, 2019). Many seniors would have to travel an hour or more to attend senior center events. In some areas, there is a regional van service that is usually limited to transporting seniors to medical appointments (KVCAP, 2022). As a result, the time/distance issue remains a deterrent to attending social events.

In rural areas, many of the seniors are at or below poverty level, have food insecurities, lack of health care access, and housing challenges (Weirich & Benson, 2019). These basic needs issues cause barriers to obtaining adequate social interactions such as attending senior centers. There are approximately 11,000 senior centers in the United States (All About Seniors, 2020). In Maine, there are currently 36 senior centers with 20 of them in one of three major urban areas (Cause IQ, 2022).

### **Organization Background and Context**

The state of Maine has the oldest median population in the United States with people over 65 making up 21.1% (US Census Bureau, 2019a). In the town where the center is located, there are over 1,700 individuals over age 60 (Robbins, 2019). The Senior Center accepts participants, 60 and older, from this and neighboring towns. As a result, the center has the potential to attract a significant portion of the state's older residents.

The Senior Center in this study is located in a rural town and was newly opened in June 2019 (Roberts, 2019). The Senior Center is primarily funded by the town's recreation budget but is looking into obtaining grants to expand its program offerings (D. Griffin, personal communications, July 20, 2021). The Senior Center offers education, games, crafts, various community activities, and social interactions. Using a Café model, the Senior center focuses on building a sense of community by keeping seniors socially active (Roberts, 2019). Currently the Senior Center is open two days a week for social gatherings and games. Some of the activities they have are stretches and balance exercises, games, potluck lunches, bingo, outings to restaurants, crafting, and educational

meetings. They also have seasonal activities such as going to concerts at the gazebo, planting gardens, or Christmas tree lighting.

This study looks at what the organization has done to acquire and sustain participation in the past, what barriers exist for rural seniors to attend the center, perceptions of those who have and have not participated in the center, and how the senior center is created and run.

### **Role of the DPA Student/Researcher**

This case study focuses on a single rural nonprofit senior center and the perception of the local seniors. From my perspective as the researcher conducting this study, I have no relationship with the Senior Center under study beyond consulting with them on this project. However, I am familiar with the organization's priority issue and the portion of the population affected. I am highly motivated to see the organization succeed in its mission, and I am determined to assist in helping the local seniors to find a way to age in place in the best possible way. My main driving force is to make sure seniors are getting plenty of social interaction which they receive by participating in center activities. It is essential to ensure that I focus on senior perceptions and not my own perceptions as to what they need.

My Ph.D. dissertation was on using Facebook as a means of obtaining social support (Fontaine, 2018). During that study I found that older adults needed both face-to-face and online social support to help reduce their stress. According to the literature, one resource for older adults to receive social support is through organizations such as a senior center or a mixed aged community center (Pardasani, 2019).

This provides a connection between my two studies as further research found that rural seniors were more vulnerable to struggling with aging in place well. While studies addressed urban seniors and senior centers, there is very little research on the perceptions of rural seniors in regarding senior centers. To sustain and increase senior center usage, there is a need to better understand senior's perceptions and the barriers to attending a senior center in a rural town.

### **Summary**

In Section 2, I documented the literature on the conceptual framework of PE-Fit Theory and the gap as it relates to seniors and senior centers. I discussed the relevance of the study to the rural population and senior centers. In Section 3, I present the qualitative case study research method and procedures which was used to collect and analyze the study data.

### Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

#### **Introduction**

The problem being faced by the rural Senior Center in this case study is the need to increase and sustain participation by seniors. The Senior Center is in its infancy of development which is a perfect time to examine how to increase and sustain participation by local seniors. A senior center in a rural area is very important to encourage seniors to get out of their homes and become involved with the community. By doing so seniors who wish to age in place increase their general wellness physically, mentally, and socially. In an urban setting there are many more services available to the seniors due to a greater population density as well as, in general, a higher socioeconomic status (Dye et al., 2011). Rural seniors experience more barriers due to the lack of income, lack of services, and lack of transportation (Cohen & Bennett, 2017).

In partnership with the town, the local churches, businesses, and the community, the Senior Center can provide a social setting where local seniors can gather for socialization, lectures, seminars, games, exercise, and other activities (Senior Center, 2021). These activities help to increase health awareness (physical, mental, social, and financial) which help to keep the seniors in their homes and communities (Aging in Place, 2021). By being aware of the potential barriers and creating a plan to overcome them, the Senior Center will be able to create a solid foundation on which to mature and grow. Additionally other senior centers will benefit from this information as they create a presence in their communities.

## **Practice-focused Questions**

### **Restate Problem**

The problem being faced by the rural Senior Center is the desire to increase and sustain participation by seniors. To better understand what can be done to increase and sustain participation the center needs to know and understand the barriers to attending from the perspective of the local seniors. Much of the literature involving seniors and senior centers is focused on urban examples. This study focuses on rural seniors in a rural state and a rural senior center.

### **Research Questions**

For those who participate at the Senior Center:

RQ1: How does the Senior Center fit the physical needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ2: How does the Senior Center fit the social needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ3: What attracts seniors who attend the center to the Senior Center?

For those who do not participate in a senior center (non-attending seniors):

RQ4: What are the impressions that non-attending seniors have of senior centers?

RQ5: What reasons do non-attending seniors give for not attending a senior center?

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the Senior Center to sustain and increase participation in center activities. The theoretical framework of the study is the



PE-Fit theory, and the study design is a qualitative case study. Individual Interviews with seniors who attend the Senior Center, as well as those who do not attend, gave a perception of what they want and need in a senior center (see Appendix A). Barriers for attending a senior center were highlighted. Therefore, using a qualitative case study helped to create the alignment between the purpose, the problem, and the study design.

### **Definitions**

*Accessibility:* **The** ease to obtain or use the senior center and its activities.

*Age in Place:* The ability for seniors to live safely in their community while maintaining their physical, social, and mental health (RHIHub, 2019).

*Community:* This encompasses the local town as well as the Senior Center group.

*Functionality:* The quality of a senior center to suit the needs of the senior's population.

*Nonattending senior:* A senior who does not attend any senior centers.

*Person-Environment fit theory:* The degree to which an individual's needs match the environment in which they interact (Lein et al. 2015).

*Rural:* An area with low population density, many farm and nature areas, and fewer choices of places to shop, receive medical services, and other social services such as public transportation (RHIHub, 2022).

*Seniors:* A term used to define individuals over the age of 60 years.

*A senior center:* is a gathering place for individuals over 60 years to participate in activities and programs increasing their social interactions, health, and knowledge (Kadowak & Mahmood, 2018).

## **Sources of Evidence**

This study was designed to record and transcribe qualitative data from individual interviews to better understand the senior perspective related to senior centers. The study investigated barriers to attending the center, impressions of the center's activities, the fit of the center to the needs of the senior, how individuals learn about the center, seniors' assessment of the environment, and why some seniors do not participate in center activities. The assumptions in qualitative research are the use of a small non-random sample, and the use of inductive reasoning to analyze the study results.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to sustain and increase participation. Data collected from the qualitative individual interviews revealed themes or patterns of senior perceptions. Perceptions included the barriers to attending the center (accessibility) and needs and expectations to keep them engaged in activities (functionality). This information was essential to understanding how to sustain and increase participation.

## **Evidence Generated by Administrative Study**

### **Participants**

There were two groups of participants in this study that were interviewed. The first group will be drawn from the seniors who participate in the Senior Center activities. The second group included a sampling of seniors from the local community who do not participate in any senior center. Both groups were invited to be interviewed through email invitations and invitational flyers posted at local churches, the library, and town hall with permission of the organizations.

The individual interviews with seniors who participate in a senior center, answered questions about how they perceive the environment both physically and socially, what interests them for activities the center offers or could offer, barriers they had to overcome to attend, and what attracts them to the Senior Center. These interviews helped determine the perception of the seniors about how well the functionality and accessibility of the senior center fits their needs. The interviews with nonattending seniors gave a perception of what they believe senior centers are and do, what barriers are in the way of participating in activities, and what changes would encourage their participation in senior center activities. (For a list of questions, see Appendix A)

### **Procedures**

Individual interviews were conducted to gather study data. Descriptive information was gathered including age, gender, and where they live (i.e., private home, nursing home, or senior facility). The interviews involved several open-ended questions allowing interviewees to respond to the topics presented. The open-ended questions examined participation in the center, perceptions of functionality and accessibility, the needs of the individual, and other perceptions of the center. The sessions were recorded, coded, and analyzed for recurring themes and patterns.

### **Protections**

Using email invitations and invitational flyers posted at local churches, the library, and town hall with permission of the organizations, the researcher invited individuals to be interviewed for the study. The invitation included the purpose and information for setting up the individual interviews.

The individual interviews were conducted in the Senior Center or local library, without the senior center director present. Due to the nature of the interviews, the participants and researcher had direct contact. The researcher took precautions not to allow any personal bias or ideas to affect outcomes of the interviews.

Prior to each interview the participants received a copy of the informed consent and emailed their consent to the researcher. They were informed the session will be recorded. The participants could withdraw at any time. If they decide to withdraw later, after the session, they could do so with the knowledge that the researcher would do her best to pull out any information they have given.

Each session was recorded. The recordings were saved on a password protected computer which will always remain in a locked room or vehicle. Once the study was completed, the recordings will be transferred to a flash drive and locked in a file cabinet within a secure building with any other study materials that were needed to preserve the raw data for a minimum of five years.

No interviews were conducted prior to the approval of Walden's IRB. The Senior Center did not need any other approval to have the study conducted. All data security and participant protections were of the highest possible standards. The researcher has experience in human research protection programs and did everything possible to keep the participants' data safe. No adverse events were expected, however, if some did happen the researcher would deal with them immediately and record the incident.

## **Documents**

Documents included the organization Facebook page and metrics, informative emails sent by the Director, distributed flyers, and organizational policies. These aided in triangulating information gained from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). The collection and analysis followed the document review protocols (see Appendix D).

## **Analysis and Synthesis**

### **Systems Used**

The interviews were recorded using a password protected voice activated digital recorder. The recordings were analyzed using NVivo software. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the Researcher. Each finished transcript was verified for accuracy with the audio recording. The researcher entered the coded transcripts into NVivo software. Codes and sub-codes from the NVivo were organized and analyzed. The researcher re-listened to the interview recordings to verify accuracy before clustering the codes into themes. These common themes were sorted into major themes and minor themes. The themes were then compiled into a description of the perceptions of the seniors. Any outlier information was also noted separate from the major themes and subthemes. These outliers may aid in better understanding the community.

The document analysis included the data from the documents being run through NVivo to find themes. A visual analysis was conducted to evaluate the eye-catching components and completeness of the data in the documents per the document review protocol.

### **Summary**

Section 3 presented the method and procedures for conducting the study. These included aligning the research questions with the research design and the problem and purpose statements. The study design is a qualitative case study where we examined the perceptions of a rural senior population regarding the local senior center. The outcomes were a clarification of how to increase senior participation in activities as well as add more local seniors to those activities. In Section 3, the recruitment of study participants, protection of participants and data collection and analysis were covered. Section 4 covers data results, evaluation, and recommendations based on the findings.

## Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The problem the Senior Center would like to address is sustaining and increasing participation of seniors in its rural catchment area. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to evaluate the rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to sustain and increase participation. This study explores how the center's environment can be shaped to better fit rural seniors' needs and expectations. Some gaps in organizational knowledge include understanding how the seniors view senior centers, how environmental barriers affect the seniors, and how to best attract seniors to the center. The research questions sought information from seniors to help fill in some of the gaps in knowledge for the Senior Center.

### **Research Questions**

For those who participate at the Senior Center:

RQ1: How does the Senior Center fit the physical needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ2: How does the Senior Center fit the social needs of the seniors who attend the center?

RQ3: What attracts seniors who attend the center to the Senior Center?

For those who do not participate in a senior center (non-attending seniors):

RQ4: What are the impressions that non-attending seniors have of senior centers?

RQ5: What reasons do non-attending seniors give for not attending a senior center?

## Findings and Implications

### Data Collection

Data was collected through individual interviews ranging in length from 15 to 45 minutes. The interviews were with 12 individuals who attend Senior Center activities (participating) and 12 individuals who do not attend senior center activities (non-participating), a total sample  $n = 24$ . The breakdown of the total sample  $n = 24$  was 9 men and 15 women: 10 individuals in their 60s, 10 in their 70s, and four in their 80s. The interviews were conducted in person at a local library and via phone for those who were unable to travel or were at high risk for Covid. The interview participants were invited to join the study through flyers and word of mouth. Everyone received a debriefing at the end of the interview. Member checking was completed within a day of the interview to ensure the researcher had captured the participants thoughts and ideas accurately.

**Table 1**

#### *Demographics*

	Age 60s	Age 70s	Age 80s	Totals
Participating Female	1	6	2	9
Participating Male	2	1	0	3
Nonparticipating Female	2	2	2	6
Nonparticipating Male	5	1	0	6
Totals	10	10	4	24



## **Data Sources**

Data sources for this study were participant responses to qualitative semistructured, open-ended interview questions. These questions were designed to facilitate an open dialog with participants during their interviews, encouraging them to describe their experiences with the Senior Center as well as exploring what keeps seniors from participating in senior centers. The data from the interviews were transcribed and all raw data was placed into NVivo and then run through NVivo's word frequency finder and word cloud creator. For example, participant and nonparticipant word clouds were created to visually compare these two groups (see figure 1 and figure 2). The data was further hand coded by question, age (via decade grouping), gender, and participant/nonparticipant. Next each code category was run through NVivo's auto theme creator to find themes.

Qualitative data were collected from transcribed interviews using NVivo software. NVivo was used to identify themes in participant perceptions and understandings related to the environment of the center. Further, NVivo was used to identify themes regarding any barriers to attending the center which may be unique to the rural area. The purpose of this study was to identify and improve the participation of seniors in the rural senior center to help the organization better accomplish their mission.

Additionally, documents, including the Senior Center's Facebook page, informative emails, flyers, and policies were reviewed. These were analyzed for themes, components, accessibility, and functionality. A visual analysis was conducted to evaluate the eye-catching components and completeness of the data in the documents.

A SW/COT analysis was conducted. SWOT Analysis focuses on the collection and structuring of information about the situation to help design and implement strategies and management decisions (Shvardak, 2021). Strengths and weaknesses look at the internal factors of the organization. Opportunities and threats look at the external factors which are affecting the organization (Spichak et al., 2021). Spichak et al. (2021) states that SWOT analysis is a reliable tool for qualitative analysis for organizations to conduct strategic analysis. A SCOT analysis is like a SWOT analysis. The difference is instead of Weaknesses, internal Concerns or Challenges are examined. Working with the Senior Center, looking at concerns and challenges frames the information in a more understandable manner.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was first examined for differences between participants and nonparticipants in senior center activities within rural areas. The word clouds for each group show many similarities, as well as some significant differences (figure 1 and figure 2). Each group shows change, activities, and events at the same level on the word cloud. 'Community' is shown as more important to the participating group than the non-participating group. This could be due to the senior center encouraging individuals to participate in community activities. This is a great example of PE-Fit congruence, where the environment shapes the behaviors of the individual (Carp and Carp, 1984). Perhaps, just participating in senior center activities makes these individuals feel part of a community.

Kahana (1975) discusses a weighted priority of needs in which each individual must assess when looking at an environment. The non-participating group has 'work' as an important factor and 'community' as a tertiary factor. This could mean that work interferes with an individual's feeling of being connected to their community. Work could also be a barrier to attending senior center activities. For the participating group 'work' is in the fourth level of the word cloud. It is just not as important to this group as 'community'. The word 'senior' could also be a barrier to attending senior center activities. The non-participating group placed the word at a higher level than the participating group. This could be due to the participating group having a better understanding of themselves and accepting that age-wise they are seniors. Some seniors have mentioned that the word 'senior' sounds old or like someone in a nursing home. "I'm not a senior, I don't need to be in that type of environment with a bunch of old women gossiping" (Interviewee 4).



The research questions focus on how well senior centers in rural areas fit the needs and wants of the seniors using the PE-Fit theory. They explore physical fit, social fit, as well as barriers to participating in senior center activities. The following analysis and discussions will have quotes from interviewed individuals. Due to the small sample size of 24 interview participants and to keep them completely anonymous, the interviewees will only be labeled 'Interviewee #' when being quoted.

### **Research Question Themes**

The interviews looked at how seniors view a senior center, preconceived ideas and what they expect to have happen at a senior center. While a few individuals thought a senior center was an institute where seniors are placed to be cared for, most understood it was more of a social environment for seniors. The main themes were centered around activities expected at a senior center such as meals, games, and discussion groups. Themes around barriers were transportation, time, and health issues. The themes were developed for each interview question, gender, age group, and participation/non-participation in senior centers (See table 2)

**Table 2***Theme Breakdown*

Group	Category	Themes
RQ1	Physical Needs	Chairs, Tables, Space, Entrance
RQ2	Social Needs	Activities, socialization, social support
RQ3	Attracting Seniors	Games, activities: physical, mental, social, and advertising
RQ4	Impressions of Senior Centers	Games, meals, activities, for old people
RQ5	Barriers to attending	time, age, transportation, health, finances
60's	Overall discussions	Activities and social support
70's	Overall discussions	Aging concerns, transportation, activities, and community involvement
80's	Overall discussions	Isolation, transportation, activities: physical, social, intellectual
Male	Overall discussions	Mental and physical health concerns and transportation issues, activities, games, meals, socialization
Female	Overall discussions	Health, aging, financial concerns, social support, activities, trips, socialization, games

***RQ1***

When discussing how the Senior Center fits the physical needs of the seniors who attend, there were four distinct themes: Chairs, Tables, Space, and Entrance. The chairs were mentioned by 3 of the seniors. The chairs are comfortable to sit in and easy to push in and out from the tables. Over all the chairs fit the needs of the seniors. The tables are 6-foot round tables which easily fit 6 people and can accommodate 8 people when playing games. The tables are small enough that everyone can hear and see each other easily, increasing the ability to socialize and facilitate conversations yet large enough to play all kinds of games on. Round tables seem to be the best fit physically and socially for the seniors. The way the seniors perceive and interact with the physical environment show there is a good physical PE-Fit for them (Cvitkovich & Wister, 2001).

In general, the current space being used fits seniors' needs with a few exceptions. There is an ability to use a separate room with a door when more quiet conversations are warranted. However, the major issue is the lack of soft surfaces. There are no rugs or curtains, and the main room is large with high ceilings. This leads to noise being intensified and causes some echoing. Individuals with hearing aids suffer because hearing aids cannot filter background noise. As a result, seniors either need to turn their hearing aids off or way down making conversation more difficult. Interviewee 1 stated, "If someone wears hearing aids it makes it impossible to be comfortable there". A few individuals stopped attending the Center due to the noise issues. The perceived satisfaction with the environment decreases unless the environment increases the support needed for the individual (Carp & Carp, 1984). Therefore, the Center needs to make

some changes to increase the environmental support for the attendees by adding some soft surfaces to absorb sound.

In this large room there are many tables. One concern raised was that this could be an issue for someone in a wheelchair to comfortably navigate. Interviewee 21 stated, “The space is just one big room making it harder to break out into groups for games”. The restroom is on the same floor as the kitchen and meeting space. One individual pointed out that the bathroom is very tight if someone is in a wheelchair. Another mentioned having two bathrooms would be nice. The kitchen was mentioned by a participant stating, “there wasn’t enough space for a wheelchair to go through the kitchen. This is an example of a priority model which looks at all the unmet needs within the environment, prioritizes them based on subjective significance (Ouyang, 2018). At this point in time the Center does not have anyone wheelchair bound but should look at solutions moving forward. And the oven doesn’t work correctly making it difficult to heat food for potlucks and lunches” (Interviewee 21). “The oven is a gas oven, and the starting mechanism does not work making it dangerous to use” (Interviewee 1). Lien et al. (2015), found that objective accessibility did not reflect the barriers priority as well as the individual’s subjective perception. At the Center, the kitchen issues were a priority for some but not for others showing that not every priority is weighted the same by everyone (Ouyang, 2018).

The entrance is very good. There is a large parking lot, a ramp and stairs into the building, and the doorway is nice and wide. The ease of parking and the entryway were selling points for this Senior Center. No one found any barriers with the entryway or



parking lot. While the street sign indicates which building contains the Senior Center, there are no signs directing the seniors to the accessible entrance. As a result, the lack of signage is a barrier to seniors attending the activities.

### ***RQ2***

The expectations of an environment are that it should fulfill the need of a comfortable space for the individual to socialize and interact (Kahana et al., 1980). The social needs of the seniors are met in several different ways at the Senior Center. The three themes which formed were activities, socialization, and social support. Activities give the seniors opportunities for casual and relaxed conversations. This senior center is open two days a week. Tuesdays are crafts, community service activities, speakers, and general socialization. Wednesdays are reserved for games, and outside activities are done on other days of the week.

The craft days are usually only attended by the women. These activities include Knit or Knot, where individuals crochet, knit, and socialize. Community Service projects include things such as putting together Easter baskets for the town's Easter egg hunt and working with other civic groups in town to help the community. Seasonal activities occur on Tuesdays as well. Quilting lessons, flower pressing, and pot painting are some of the seasonal crafts done this year. Speakers come in on Tuesdays and men tend to join for these events. The Senior Center has had a nutritionist talk about changing dietary needs of seniors and how to eat healthy on a budget. An energy rebate specialist gave a talk about how to cut heating bills using a heat pump. The speakers aid in helping the seniors to be able to age well in place. For physical activities, Tuesdays include chair exercises

and stretches designed for all ability levels. One of the favorite activities is the potluck lunches. This attracts the most people, as many are motivated by food and socialization. Everyone enjoys eating and chatting and the feeling of being part of a community.

Wednesdays are well attended by both men and women. Game day appeals to a larger audience. The size of the room allows for multiple games to play simultaneously. The issue here is that it is difficult for some to hear people talking to them because the room gets noisy with chatter, dice, dominos, and laughter. There is always a chance for socialization even during game play time, “We talk and laugh during game time” (Interviewee 9). “On game day, if you were there and choose not to play a game you (are) certainly still welcome to come and do something else like maybe having a quiet conversation somewhere” (Interviewee 2). The games can be anything from board games to mahjong. Games are available at the Senior Center. However, many attendees also bring games to share with the group. As newcomers stop by, the regular attendees do what they can to make them feel welcome.

On some days when the center is not open, there are other activities planned. In the summer there is a music series at the gazebo by the river. The seniors sometimes sell baked goods there. They also take day trips to places like botanical gardens, museums, train rides, and apple orchards. They try to take different physical needs into account when getting together for trips.

Most attendees feel there is plenty of time for socialization. “We have quite a bit of time for social interactions where we learn about things in the community or information where we learn about workarounds as we age” (Interviewee 19). Discussions

include what is happening with family members and with the community. Members share what they do for workarounds as they age and cannot do everything they used to do.

Socialization leads to social support for each other. Social support consists of four types of resources needed to cope with daily stimuli. These are objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies (Hobfoll, 1989). Object resources are physical or tangible material things such as books, clothing, food, or a house; Condition resources are less tangible such as social norms, stereotypes, and environments; Personal Characteristics include personality traits and personal philosophies; Energy resources include money, time, and knowledge (Buchwald, 2010). All these types of resources are exhibited in the Senior Center. The Seniors share knowledge, talk about problems and successes, check in with each other, and give rides when needed. “My wife is sick, and the group has been there for me when I needed some emotional support” (Interviewee 9). Not only do the seniors offer emotional support to each other but they share books, games, and food. The environment is conducive to helping, sharing, and socializing as well as supporting each other in many ways. “I feel that the center offers social support in several ways, just in our discussions about our lives and in the speakers, we have brought in” (Interviewee 1). The social interactions senior centers can offer includes knowledge sharing, emotional support, appraisal of individual function as compared to peers, and ride sharing opportunities (Bakhshandeh et al, 2021). The Senior Center appears to be a great PE-Fit for the seniors regarding socialization. There is ample opportunity for individuals to knowledge share, offer emotional support, and appraisal or comparison of function between individuals, and share rides when needed. These opportunities of

socialization are important for the Center to add to their Facebook page and advertising efforts to help attract more participants in the center.

### ***RQ3***

This series of questions examined how to attract seniors to the Center. The questions covered: how seniors heard about the center; what they enjoy at the center; what they feel keeps others from joining in on activities; and what other activities they would like to have at the center.

The seniors interviewed stated that they learned about the center via word of mouth and from the Facebook page. “I started looking online, since that's how I do things usually, to see what was available in the town, shortly after I moved here, and saw something about the Senior Center” (Interviewee 1). “I heard from a friend that they played games at the local senior center” (Interviewee 8). However, a theme emerged regarding the lack of information about the Senior Center and how it works. This has been a barrier for some to attend activities. “On the Facebook page, there was very little information about that kind of thing just the hours that they were open, um, and so I just kind of put it on the back burner and then COVID happened” (Interviewee 1). A new experience can be very intimidating, and even more so when you do not know what to expect. Interviewee 20 stated:

I found them on Facebook. I didn't know if I needed to be there the whole time they were open, or if I could just drop in. I was too nervous to go. My daughter called for me and found out more information. Now I love going.

The theme of games was prevalent in all the interviewees' minds. The Center offers a game day where board games, card games and sometimes outside games such as bocce ball and corn hole are played all day. "I love playing games" (Interviewee 8). "Knowing they played games intrigued me of course because that is a big thing for me" (Interviewee 9). Arts and crafts are also a large draw for seniors especially the seasonal crafts. While the seniors who attend the center enjoy games and crafts, they also want more activities and a wider variety. When asked about what they wanted to see happen at the Center, the answers did not provide a clear theme. However, the theme could be 'more things'. The seniors seem to want to stay mentally and physically active. "Book club, more speakers, and other fun activities" were among those requested (Interviewee 22). Also mentioned were more speakers who talked about trips or historical events. As well as hearing about trips, seniors requested to go on more trips as a group. "Maybe trips that are advertised in the community programs and look into doing bus trips making sure to advertise them well" (Interviewee 24). Again, the need for more information and advertising seems to be an important theme.

The lack of advertising was one of the common themes when asked why more people do not attend the center or its activities. However, the lack of transportation was the major barrier to attending the center. "Other seniors don't attend because they don't know about the center, they may have transportation issues, or just don't get what they do here" (Interviewee 1). In a rural area, there is a concern that the lack of public transportation will keep other seniors from attending and getting what they need. "The

people who really need the center can't make it here due to transportation issues or they just never heard about the center" (Interviewee 9).

When asked how to attract more seniors, the theme was better advertising. "The center could attract more seniors if they had better online information and maybe a mailer that explained what we do here" (Interviewee 19). Others suggested the town hall and local stores were great places to advertise. No matter where the advertising was going, it needed clear full information about how they function at the center.

An omnichannel approach is recommended for marketing services to the senior population (Shumaker, 2022). Omnichannel includes print, electronic, email, radio/TV, and remarketing approaches. Based on the above results, word of mouth is very important to the Senior population. They like hearing about the experiences friends and family have had at a Senior Center. Testimonials and sharing experiences on the Center's social media pages as well as individuals sharing on their social media pages could help with getting the word out about the Center and their activities.

#### ***RQ4***

Individuals who have never attended a senior center have different thoughts as to what a senior center is and what happens at one. This is not surprising since there are several types of senior centers that offer a range of activities from social services to social events (Keller, 2017). Most individuals have an accurate idea of a senior center as a place for socialization and knowledge acquisition. "Older people gather to play games, eat prepared meals, do crafts, various activities, and bake together" (Interviewee 3). Others

confuse it with an assisted living or nursing home where seniors reside and receive medical care. Interviewee 4 stated:

I've seen places where it's just a room and if you have problems, they'll call the ambulance for you, and they provide a very very basic meal one time a day and pretty much they just have a living room where people meet and kind of watch TV and they don't provide anything in their room.

The general themes throughout the interviews were games and meals. "I suppose it's much more the folks getting together to enjoy each other's company and do activities, maybe games, card games and so forth" and "maybe meals, crafts, and events of some sort" (Interviewees 3 and 18). There are four basic models of senior centers: the café, the technology, the fitness, and the lifelong learning (Keller, 2017). In rural areas, many senior centers, including the one in this study, are café style where tea and coffee are offered along with games, activities, crafts, and socialization (Keller, 2017). Others offer meals and activities but expect the seniors to pay for these services (Keller, 2017).

### ***RQ5***

The fifth research question was examining why people do not attend a senior center, what are their reasons or barriers to attending. Forty-three percent of Baby boomers feel there is not a need for a senior center due to the great number of other service options they have in their community (Pardasani, 2019). However, in rural areas there is a lack of services including healthcare and mental healthcare. Many individuals drive over an hour to get to get to the needed services.

In research question 5, seniors who do not attend a senior center were asked why they do not attend, what concerns they have about aging, and what activities and speakers might attract them to a senior center. The themes that popped up for why they do not attend were time, age, and transportation. Time was a popular theme; many said they have family obligations such as grand kids or they were still working. “I’m still working and still fairly busy so really time and other obligations” (Interviewee 10). Others were active with the local grange or church. “I go to the local grange for speakers, music gatherings, and philosophy discussion group” (Interviewee 13).

Transportation is an issue in rural areas. “Transportation is a big issue for me” (Interviewee 14). There were 20 mentions of transportation being an issue in rural areas. In rural towns, homes are spread out, isolated, and public transportation is unavailable. This can become an issue for older individuals who may not have the money for a car or maybe do not drive any more due to health or aging issues. As a result, many seniors end up feeling isolated. “I feel isolated and like a burden” (Interviewee 12). “I was getting lonely, and isolation is a hard thing” (Interviewee 14). The lack of transportation may also affect their physical health as well as their mental health when it gets harder to go to the store or the doctor’s office (Fong et al., 2021).

Age was another reason individuals stated they do not attend a senior center. The seniors interviewed did not feel they were old enough to attend. Eleven of the 12 non-attending interviewees discussed age. “I think it’s for the older community like 80s and 90s” (Interviewee 3). The belief is that senior centers are just for older seniors. However, senior centers support individuals as young as 55 years old and assist them to age in place



well. Successful aging in place is not just about living life on your own terms in your own home, but includes maintaining relationships, staying involved with the community, keeping mentally, spiritually, and physically healthy (Pfeiffer, 2013).

Health was a recurring theme when discussing concerns about aging. Eight of the 12 non-attending interviewees stated health as their number one concern.

“Health, that's the big issue just like you never know what's going to happen, you know you could have stroke and spend the rest of your life a vegetable. I mean we have some insurance to help us with that. But that's a lot of money. My concerns about the future are just how am I gonna take care of myself, my wife, and my family. That's the other thing, I worry about my kids” (Interviewee 4). “I think, like everybody, health is a concern as you're aging. My mom was only 66 when she died, and her health was very poor. Health concerns were really concerning, so maybe learning more information about how to stay healthy and live well” (Interviewee 2). The concern about health balloons into worries about family, finances, and insurance. “I worry about health issues, finances, being a drain on society, being able to afford rent (Interviewee 5).”

Activities of interest broke down into three basic themes: discussions, physical activities, and fun activities. The discussion suggestions were based on a desire for intellectual exchanges. The most popular suggestions were philosophy and history discussions. Book clubs were also mentioned. “I really enjoy reading. I enjoy visiting with other people. I enjoy playing games, enjoy doing puzzles, so um, I would likely go to a Senior Center if they offer, maybe, like a book club. I would love to go to a book club” (Interviewee 12). Many non-attendees interviewed go to other groups where these

types of discussions happen. “I like intellectual discussions like the philosophy discussions we have at the grange, I enjoy conversations with all types of people” (Interviewee 13). Physical activities such as walking, exercising, and stretching are important and are not seen as solitary activities: “classes on, like, very simple exercises, maybe” (Interviewee 4).

“I've heard about, like, some places do, like, walks, uh-huh where so you have somebody to walk with, um, because it's hard to motivate yourself when you're the only one walking, right you know and at our age something, like, you know running or going to a health club is harder because your muscles and your bones aren't really up to it but I do enjoy walking but I wish I had people to walk with so that might be something I'd be interested in if they offered it” (Interviewee 14).

Games have been an overarching theme throughout the study. Both attendees and non-attendees have discussed games. “The Grange in our area used to have game nights. It was all ages and I really enjoyed those and then they stopped having them” (Interviewee 16). “You know if they had game nights that would be worth it” (Interviewee 2). The researcher has observed a variety of games being played at the Senior Center. There are many levels of game players and of competitiveness. However, all levels are welcome, and help is available as needed.

### **Gender Themes**

The general themes for the gender comparison were issues/concerns, socialization/social support, and activities. Both genders brought up health concerns and transportation issues. Men were also concerned with mental health issues such as

depression as they aged. Women brought up concerns over aging in general and financial concerns such as how to pay for their home, food, heat, and health insurance. A few men (non-attendees) thought a senior center was the same as a nursing home. Their concern was that a senior center was an adult-sitting service where individuals were placed in front of a TV. Perceptions of what a senior center is may be a barrier to people attending activities.

Socialization/social support was more prominent with the women than men. However, men enjoy socialization when connected to activities such as a game. Women were interested in being supportive of other attendees as they did crafts or played games. Men and women both discussed loving social time and social activities. Women also discussed enjoying conversations, meeting people in general, and the social support shared by all who attend activities.

Activity discussions included both the activities they enjoyed doing as well as what they would like to do. The themes in the activities were physical, social, and intellectual. The men discussed the need for more intellectual activities. Suggestions were history discussions, book clubs, debates, and general intellectual discussions. Both men and women wanted book clubs and philosophy discussions. Women requested discussions and speakers based around health and financial issues they face as they age. Men discussed outdoor social activities such as golf. Women are more interested day trips. Both men and women like meals, such as potlucks. However, men prefer prepared meals. Both genders love games and game days. While men's and women's preferences differ, in general both genders want the same basic activities.

Schladitz et al. (2022) found that “women focused on healthy eating whereas men focused on an active lifestyle and meaningful activities.” As with this study, Schladitz et al. (2022) found that both men and women considered physical and social activities important for ageing in place well. The Senior Center could increase the activities to encompass more meaningful activities as well as support an active lifestyle and healthy eating. The Center has had a nutritionist come in to discuss healthy eating as people age which is a good PE-Fit for individuals. More programs and activities to support the participants would be a great addition to the center.

### **Age Themes**

The three age groups interviewed were individuals in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. As the groups aged their focus on what was needed changed. The 60-year-olds were still thinking about work or group activities they do with friends and family. The 70-year-olds started focusing more on health and financial related issues as well as wanting to be part of a community. The 80-year-olds were worried about being a burden, transportation, and isolation. Because they were not as independent as they once were due to health and aging issues, they felt they had been tucked away. Below is a deeper analysis of each age group.

#### ***60 Year Olds***

The 60-year-old group ranged from 60 to 69. Activities and social support were two main themes for these individuals. The 60s group was interested in more physically active activities and more structure to the games. They suggested more outside activities such as golf, cornhole, tai chi, and walks. “Sing alongs or karaoke or anything like that,

maybe some outdoor activities” (Interviewee 6). They also enjoy socialization time as well as social support. Social support has been an important part of the Senior Center. “My wife is sick, and the group has been there for me when I needed some emotional support” (Interviewee 9). Another theme was concerns for the future.

“I don't know a lot about retirement, um, and I think like everybody, health is a concern as you're aging. My mom was only 66 when she died, and her health was very poor. Health concerns really are concerning, so maybe learning more information about how to stay healthy and live well” (Interviewee 2).

### ***70 Year Olds***

The 70-year-old group included ages 70 to 79. The major themes with this group were concerns, activities, and community involvement. Transportation was a primary concern. The lack of public transportation as well as a lack of taxis/Ubbers worries the 70-year-olds. There is a service which will take older people to their doctors' appointments, however it is not reliable due to the high demand for the service. “If my daughter can't drive me then someone here comes and gets me because we don't have public transportation in the town” (Interviewee 11). There are several concerns for the 70-year-olds about how to find out about the center. They discussed that there is not much information on-line. “There was very little information about that kind of thing just the hours that they were open, um, and so I just kind of put it on the back burner” (Interviewee 1). There were several suggestions on how to increase participation in activities, such as advertising the activities on Facebook and in the community programs

catalog. Another concern was the echoing and loudness in the senior center. Some individuals stopped coming because it interfered with their hearing aids.

Activities for 70-year-olds were also broken down into physical, social, and intellectual activities. Physical activities included day trips, active games, and outside events. One individual stated, “I love splitting wood, it’s great physical activity” (Interviewee 16). While that is not something a senior center would include in its activities, it is an indication of how physically active this age group is. Social activities are very important to this group. It is where they share knowledge, support each other, and generally enjoy conversations. “We bring bag lunches and have great conversations over lunch” (Interviewee 1). “I enjoy social activities and getting information on navigating medical stuff” (Interviewee 16). Game day is always a much-loved social activity. It does not seem to matter what the game is, but the comradery is the important factor. Intellectual activities are also important to this group. They enjoy intellectual discussions on books, philosophy, and financial planning. The center does not currently offer these activities, so people go to other places such as a grange hall and a Quaker meeting house.

For the 70-year-old group, community involvement is very important. They join in activities to feel a part of a community and they serve the community. At Easter time they work with the Lion’s Club to make Easter baskets for the town to give to children. They bake cookies and knit hats to help support those in the community who need help. Many watch their grandchildren or volunteer in other places.

### ***80 Year Olds***

The 80-year-old group ranged from 80 to 89. Transportation issues are the number one theme. “In a rural area we don’t have public transportation and the KVCAP only gives us rides to doctor appointments” (Interviewee 14). Most of the 80-year-olds interviewed are no longer driving themselves or at least not the distances needed to get to doctors or group activities. Without public transportation they need to rely on friends and family. Other issues are isolation and loneliness. “Isolation is a hard thing because you can’t get out as much and no one wants to visit” (Interviewee 23). Activities that are important to this group include social, intellectual, and physical in that order. “I love book clubs, talking about birds, and just learning things in general” (Interviewee 12). Strout et al. (2018), define wellness as “a multidimensional structure encompassing 5–7 dimensions: social, occupational, spiritual, physical, intellectual, environmental, and psychological”. The Senior Center seems to fit everyone’s needs socially, intellectually, and supportively, however, the issues with the noise level and echoing were brought up by many individuals who attend the Senior Center. Therefore, the physical environment still needs work to be a better fit for seniors in this category. The Center does not cover occupational nor spiritual aspects of wellness however some components of the social support could help individuals in this aspect.

### **Document Review Analysis**

The Senior Center had several types of documents, both paper and online/social media, which were reviewed: Flyers, Emails, Facebook Page, and Policies. General reviews included: clear goal, eye-catching, message, graphic and pictures, contact information, target audience, consistency, and information. For social media and on-line

interactions, keeping the information fresh and interactive was added to the analysis. The analysis for the Policies included clarity of the effect and intention of the policy, is the policy being implemented properly, and is the policy complete and clearly written.

Flyers and paper calendar of events were only distributed at the town hall. There was a flyer in a glass community case on the outside wall of the town hall as well as a stack of flyers and calendars in a magazine rack inside of the town hall. The flyers and paper calendars were copied onto dull yellow paper with black ink. The calendars included that month's activities. Tuesdays had stated knit or knot and Wednesdays stated game day. No other details were included on the calendar. Every so often they would include potluck on a calendar, with no other details. The calendars did not include a logo but did state the Centers name on the paper.



**Table 3***Document Review Overview*

Documents	Theme	Topics	Accessibility	Functionality
All Documents	Information Font Graphics	No logos, no continuity, too many fonts, small fonts	Using different mediums is good	Need better consistency between documents.
Facebook Page	Action Information	No call to action Lack of info	Accessible to public must have web access	Not all seniors use the internet
Emails	Information	Not enough event info	Small contact list	Does not alert whole public about events or hours
Flyers	Font Audience	Different fonts, messy looking, does not target audience well	In town hall only	Does not target proper audience Hard to read
Policies	Inconsistent	Inconsistent and ambiguous information	Not listed anywhere, most people do not know they exist	Not functional if no one knows about them

The flyers were reviewed looking for the following items: clear goal, eye catching, message, graphics, content information, target audience, consistency, and information completeness. The goal of the flyer was to invite individuals over 60 to join in on the Senior Center activities. The flyer did state the age group being invited. However, the flyer was not clear who was inviting them and what they were invited to do. Eye-catching flyers should grab the attention of people and peak interest. The

Center's flyer has a headline that states 'OVER 60?' This does catch immediate attention to the flyer and shows it is for people over 60. However, there are multiple fonts and font sizes making the flyer difficult to read, especially for the over 60 crowd.

The message of a flyer should be short, clear, and call people to action. The Center's flyer does ask for people over 60 to come join them. However, it is not clear what they are joining nor does the flyer have a call to action feel or use action words. Graphics and pictures add interest and make the message eye-catching. This flyer had zero graphics, no logo, and was very wordy. The flyer gave clear contact information by way of address, mail, and phone number to get more information. The target audience was addressed with the headline 'Over 60?'. However, the layout and different fonts make it difficult to read and understand what they want. General information such as where, what, and when is listed on the flyer. However, again, it is so difficult to understand because it is too wordy and feels like something is missing. As for consistency between documents and social media, the flyers do not match information on the Facebook page.

The Facebook page is confusing and out of date. There is no clear goal stated on this page. Nothing pops out; therefore, nothing is particularly eye-catching. There were no calls to action and no real message. The Facebook page did state it was to benefit seniors in the area by offerings in education. This statement is very confusing as to what the senior center offers and does. There are some random photos but no logo and nothing to show what they offer. Phone and email information are on the page for individuals to contact for more information. It is not clear who the Center is for, what they do there, or

why anyone would attend. The information is sparse or not kept up to date. There were zero interactions with the Facebook page by other individuals.

The emails were basically the calendar being sent out each month. The email list did not include all the individuals who attended the Center regularly. It was a very small group of people who received these emails. There were zero calls to action, just the calendar. No graphics are included in the emails. The only contact information is the director's email address. The emails do not get to the target audience and there is no consistency with any other form of informative materials from the Center. The emails are very ineffective to getting individuals to attend functions and programs.

The policies are considered Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The SOPs are not completely clear and therefore, the effect and the intention of the SOPs are somewhat muddled. The Sops need more clarification as well as more organization. The implementation of the SOP's are very loosely followed. An example is all volunteers are to receive a volunteer handbook. As a researcher I was considered a volunteer. I never received a handbook, nor ever saw the existence of a handbook. Another example is new attendees are not made aware of the policies. There is no posting of the policies where attendees can review them to make sure they match up with requirements to attend. The SOPs have a lot of information in them; however, they also lack quite a bit of information. There needs to be more detailed and up to date information included.

### **SCOT Analysis**

The SCOT analysis sums up the overall findings based on the results of the interviews conducted (see Table 4). While many of the results found the Senior Center's

PE-Fit with area seniors to have many strengths, there are several issues and challenges which need to be addressed. In the recommendations section both internal and external challenges and barriers will be discussed in detail with suggestions for improvements. A strategic plan will assist the Senior Center to engage more with the community, help implement a marketing strategy, and encourage more seniors to participate in Senior Center activities. These recommendations will assist with opening new opportunities as well as address several of the challenges faced by the Senior Center.

**Table 4***SCOT Analysis*

Senior Type	Strengths	Concerns/Challenges	Opportunities	Threats
Participating	Good Physical & Social fit, Games, Activities, Café style	Space Echoes, loud environment, safety of the kitchen/oven, bathroom	More activities, more speakers, discussion groups, better advertising	Transportation, Financial, Health, lack of advertising
Nonparticipating	Activities, meals, social support	Misconception of Senior Center	Decrease isolation, increase knowledge exchange, increase socialization with peers	Transportation, health, busy lives, misunderstanding of center concept
Male	Meals, games	Want more physical activities, different social needs than females	Social support when needed, knowledge exchange	Misunderstanding what center can do for them
Female	Games, social time, crafts	Aging and financial concerns	Knowledge exchange, community involvement	Transportation, isolation, burden on society
60's	Games, meals	Lack of physical activities	Socialization, community involvement	Work, family responsibilities
70's	Games, social support	Desire more intellectual activities, noise levels	Community involvement	Health issues
80's	Discussions, Activities	noise levels, more knowledge for later life changes	Knowledge exchange	Transportation, health issues

### **Individual and Community Implications**

There needs to be a better understanding of Seniors in rural areas. What does it mean to be a senior? What do seniors need to maintain independence? What can a community do to help their aging population age in place well? This study helps to answer these questions and create a better understanding of seniors in a rural area. From this study we know that seniors want to continue to be active and relevant within their community. However, the community in general does not make space socially for seniors. Seniors are frequently forgotten in our society. Physically, as a community, we are aware of their challenging health needs. Mentally, seniors are expected to just “suck it up” and deal with the changes. Some of these changes result in a loss of autonomy and independence. Other changes are the loss of friends, health, and home. In a younger population, consideration is taken for the immense stressors these changes are on the younger individual. In the senior population, it is taken for granted that these issues will arise. without consideration for the stress it puts on the older individual. A senior center, or a community center of any sort which allows for seniors to congregate and socialize, aides in helping seniors deal with stressors of aging. At a senior center, Seniors can garner knowledge and support from one another. They can socialize, have fun, and help the community as a group. Seniors can gain new skills and keep their minds and bodies active. This leads to a healthier and happier community.

Most community environments are a good physical fit for seniors. For the most part, ADA compliant community buildings are used for community events such as town council meetings. The main physical issue in rural areas is transportation. In rural areas

there is no public transportation like buses, trains, or shuttles. Distances to doctors' offices are sometimes an hour or two away. There are fewer public services in rural areas as well. Because there are many aging individuals who may not be able to drive any longer or may not be able to afford necessities such as heat, food, or a car, there is a great need for more public services. These challenges often lead to Seniors being viewed as old and a burden. This study has shown that seniors do not want to be viewed as a burden and they are quite active in the community. The community, therefore, should find ways to help with community-based solutions for these challenges.

### **Social Change Implications**

A positive social change from this study would be understanding the needs of seniors, as well as realizing how useful and needed seniors are in their communities. Communities would benefit by relying more on their aging population to support a healthy town and community. Rural communities need to have gathering spaces for seniors to attend events and socialize with each other. This does not specifically mean they need an independent senior center. It could be accomplished at a local community center or grange hall, anyplace that could set aside time and space for seniors to meet, mingle, have fun, and learn from each other. Having specific programs and speakers for seniors would help them transition into their changing lives. Matching a senior's group with various activities within the community would help them become involved by sharing their talents and experience with others.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the SCOT analysis shown in Table 4. The recommendations relate to the physical facility, activities, organization policies, information and advertising/social media., and transportation. These recommendations will be presented in depth via a PowerPoint to the Senior Center. A second presentation will be conducted at a Town Council meeting to call the town to action to help the Senior Center thrive. Both presentations will also be available for other rural towns. These presentations will be available via the researcher's website. The researcher will be available to conduct presentations if needed. Below are the breakdowns for the various recommendations.

### **Physical Facility**

The facility being used by the Senior Center is located in a local church and therefore there are many things which are out of the Center's control. The issue of only one restroom can be kept in mind if/when the Senior Center needs to change locations. The consideration should be two restrooms with plenty of space for walkers and wheelchairs to be used comfortably in them. The kitchen oven and safety concerns should be addressed to the church hosting the Senior Center. The echoing and loudness of the facility can be addressed with the addition of some soft surfaces (O'Connor, 2016). Curtains could be donated to the church by the Senior Center as well as small area rugs for under the tables. Rugs under the table will prevent them becoming a tripping hazard, however, will help with noise control. A room divider with a quilt over it between gaming tables may help with the echoing issues. A gaming mat could be used when



playing games with dominos or loud tiles. Having felt lined boxes to roll dice in will help cut down on the dice noise.

There are many components which work well physically at the Senior Center. There is a parking lot which can accommodate anyone who wishes to join in the activities. There are both a ramp and stairs to enter the building. The doorway is big enough to accommodate a wheelchair or a large walker. The round tables enable good socialization where everyone can see everyone else's faces as well as plenty of room to play games. There is also a place to have a quiet time or a meeting away from the rest of the group. The streetside signage shows which building the Center is in. While the doorway to enter seems obvious to many, there could be better signage at the door welcoming newcomers to the correct doorway.

### **Activities**

While there is a good variety of activities and games for seniors to enjoy, there were requests for more activities. More activities could be a way to welcome more seniors into the center. One of the top requests were for to help with advice needed to age in place well. Speakers to help explain potential financial issues, health concerns, and insurance concerns were requested. Other speakers such as ones who could give talks on history, nature, travel, philosophy, and other intellectual interests were also requested. Meals are one of the popular activities the Center currently has. All ages and genders seem to really enjoy time to share food and conversation. More group meals such as potlucks should be held. Sponsoring a free senior's lunch or dinner monthly with an

activity such as bingo, a book reading, or a facilitated discussion group would help bring in more seniors.

### **Organizational Policies**

The policies are all lumped together into one document. There should be clear policies out on the sign-in table about expected behaviors within the center. Any policies such as who may attend the center should also be clearly stated on the social media page. Standard operating procedures for the staff and board to follow should be clearly stated as well as presented to the staff and board members for review. These should cover everything which has to do with running the Senior Center including safety procedures, general rules, maintenance of the facility, and how each process should be carried out and by whom. The bylaws should include responsibilities and expectations for each position on the board and staff. All these items should be written in such a way that anyone coming into the organization could run the Senior Center.

### **Information/Advertising/Social Media**

The most notable expectation with social media/informational advertising is getting the message out clearly. The major issue for senior centers is a branding issue. Everything to be viewed by the public should have the Center's logo on it. The Senior Center needs more visibility to attract more participants to its activities. The Facebook page needs to be clearly branded as well. The Facebook page needs to state what people can expect from the Center and what the Center expects from them. More information and guidance are needed on any social media pages or mailers. Flyers, mailers, emails, and social media pages should all have clear consistent information as well as a clean

font large enough for people to read. The information should be consistent across all media platforms. The information given should be complete but not convoluted. Too much or too little information can be confusing.

To attract more seniors to the Senior Center, an omnichannel approach is recommended (Shumaker, 2022). This would include print, electronic, email, radio/TV, and remarketing approaches. While tv or radio advertising would be too expensive for the Senior Center, other approaches would work within the budget. The Center could sponsor some events through the community programs brochure. Conducting more joint events with the town's recreation department would also get the name of the Center out there. Word of mouth is always the best way to advertise for the senior center. Inviting friends to take part in an event is fun for all. Having special events open to the public will also help spread the word about the Center.

Testimonials and sharing experiences on the Center's social media pages as well as individuals sharing on their social media pages, could help with getting the word out about the Center and their activities. An outreach campaign would benefit to get the word out about the Center. Part of the outreach campaign should include placing flyers in strategic locations. Also placing flyers into grocery bags at the local store, sending mailers to the homes in the town, and talking to the town hall about any isolated seniors the Center could reach out to. Reach out to local senior residential facilities about some of the activities and perhaps conduct some joint activities. Letting local family physicians know about the center would encourage them to recommend it to their patients.

## **Transportation**

Some issues are out of the center's purview such as the transportation issue. In a rural area there is no public transportation. While the active participants at the center are more than happy to give rides to one and other, they cannot offer rides as the nonprofit. This would require the organization to increase insurance and create financial issues for the center. However, individuals attending the center can offer rides in their private vehicles as they would for any friend or family member.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Project**

There are three limitations to this study:

1. The small sample size was a limitation to this study. The number of individuals who attend the Senior Center's activities dictated the sample size. This may negatively impact bias and validity of the study.
2. The focus was specifically conducted in one rural town and catchment area creating a potential limitation. Therefore, the data gleaned from this study may not be sufficient for generalization in all rural areas.
3. The qualitative nature of the study is subjective and therefore, not supported by quantitative data. However, this study may be used as a basis for future research as well as to assist in opening other senior centers in rural areas.

Strengths of the study included interviewing individuals who are attending a senior center and those who do not attend a senior center. Learning how senior centers were perceived by those who had never attended one was eye-opening. Many people perceive senior centers as a babysitting service for the elderly. Perceptions of what

seniors do at senior center activities need to be addressed through better education of the community as well as better advertisements of the senior center itself. Better understanding the barriers to attending a senior center in a rural area was also a strength of this study. Figuring out how to reach seniors who are truly isolated in the rural environment will be the next challenge which could become a future study.

## Section 5: Dissemination Plan

### **Dissemination to Organization**

Information and recommendations will be presented to the Senior Center's Board of Directors, as well as any seniors who wish to attend. The presentation will be a PowerPoint with handouts of the recommendations. The researcher will also work with the Board of Directors in a consultant role to help with creating the implementation plan.

### **Broader Audiences**

The PowerPoint will be made available on the researcher's consultant website. The researcher will also be available to travel throughout the state to give a presentation to various rural communities. Some communities have existing senior centers and others are considering creating senior centers. The researcher, as a consultant, will be able to evaluate each area and make more precise recommendations for each rural catchment area.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to sustain and increase participation. This evaluation affords valuable information to help the board of directors to create policies and shape the functionality of the senior center to best fit the needs of the Seniors. By working with the town and the many wonderful civic minded organizations, the Senior Center should be able to implement changes to sustain and increase participation of seniors in the center's activities. This in turn will help many individuals gain the support, knowledge, and socialization to help them continue to age

well in place. It will help these individuals combat isolation and create healthy mental and physical practices. Rural towns could use more centers like the one in this study to help seniors help themselves and their peers. Centers such as this one cannot maintain programs and space alone, the community around them needs to support their endeavors to create a stronger community by engaging people of all ages.

Senior Centers, or even a multiage community center with a special time for seniors, are very important in rural areas to help with socialization, community involvement, knowledge transfer, and social support. Senior centers aid in combating isolation and loneliness as well as having mental and physical health benefits. This qualitative case study evaluated rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the senior center to aid in sustaining and increasing participation in senior center activities. The study concluded, using the PE-Fit theory, that senior centers are generally a good physical and environmental fit for the needs of seniors. There were, however, several major barriers to overcome in rural areas. The first barrier is transportation. In a rural area there is no public means of transportation making it difficult for seniors to get to a senior center. The second barrier is perception of senior centers. Many people do not understand what a senior center is and what a senior center could do for them. The third barrier is time. People are working full-time much later in their lives than they used to in the past. For many, there are also the many commitments of daily life. The fourth barrier is getting the message out to those who need the service the most. There are many seniors who are home bound and do not have access to technology including computer and cell service. These are the four major barriers to

sustaining and increasing participation in senior center activities. With support of the town and keeping the center budgets at a minimum, senior centers should be able to keep the doors open in order to help those who need them the most.



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## Appendix A: Individual Interview Protocols

**Project Purpose:** To evaluate rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the Senior Center to sustain and increase participation.

**Individual Interview Participants:** Twelve individuals 60 years old and older who participate in a Senior Center and twelve individuals 60 years old and older who do not participate in a Senior Center

**Facilitation:** Interviews will be conducted by the researcher. There will be a voice recorder on during the session.

**Duration of Interviews:** Individual Interviews will last 60 to 90 minutes.

**Location:** Interviews will be in a private room at the Senior Center or at the local library.

**Refreshments:** Tea, coffee, water, and cookies will be offered to participants.

**Materials:** The researcher will bring note pad and pen, tape recorder, script, informed consent forms, and computer.

### **Securing Participants:**

The Senior Center has an email database of the individuals who have participated in center activities which they have offered to the researcher. The researcher will invite individuals to be interviewed through email. The email will include the purpose of the study.

For non-attending seniors (those who do not attend a senior center) there will be invitations to be interviewed provided through church bulletins, the library, and in the town hall with permission from the organizations.

### **Questions Being Asked:**

For those who participate at the Senior Center:

RQ1: How does the Senior Center fit the physical needs of the seniors who attend the center?

How does the Senior Center fit your physical needs?

- a. Are there any physical barriers to getting into the building?
- b. Are the activities physically accessible?
- c. Are the restrooms physically accessible?
- d. Is there anything you would change or add to the physical environment of the Senior Center?

RQ2: How does the Senior Center fit the social needs of the seniors who attend the center?

How does the Senior Center fit your social needs?

- a. Are there activities that interest you?
- b. Is there enough time for social interactions?
- c. Does the center offer social support?
- d. Are there any activities or programs, such as speakers or demonstrations, that would you like to participate in?

RQ3: What attracts seniors who attend the center to the Senior Center?

What attracted you to the Senior Center?

- a. How did you hear about the center?
- b. Why did you decide to attend the center?
- c. Why do you think other seniors do not attend the center?
- d. How do you think the center could attract other seniors?

For those who do not participate in a senior center (non-attending seniors):

RQ4: What are the impressions that non-attending seniors have of senior centers?

What are your impressions of senior centers?

- a. What do you think happens at a senior center?
- b. Are you aware there is a local senior center?
- c. Have you heard about any activities or programs they offer?

RQ5: What reasons do non-attending seniors give for not participating in a senior center?

Why are you not participating at a senior center?

- a. What barriers are keeping you from participating in the local senior center?
- b. Are there activities or programs you would like to participate in that are not offered?

### **Opening Script:**

Thank you for your time. I am Dr. Michelle Fontaine. I am working on a study for an additional doctorate degree in Public Administration. This study is about your perceptions of the functionality and accessibility of the Senior Center. (Non-attending: This study is to better understand the perceptions of individuals who are not attending a senior center.) This information will be used to create recommendations for senior centers to better meet the needs of the community they serve.

The interview should run for about an hour to an hour and a half. I will be voice recording the session. All information is confidential and no names will be used in the report.

I gave you a copy of the informed consent through email and you emailed me your consent to participate.

(Once that is complete, I will begin asking the questions and recording the answers. I may ask some clarifying follow-up questions as they answer.)

**Closing Script:**

Thank you for your input and time. From here, I will be relistening to your answers, forming themes, analyzing the data, and coming up with recommendations. The purpose of this study is to evaluate rural senior's perception of the functionality and accessibility of the Senior Center to sustain and increase participation.

(For member checking I will give them my interpretation as to what they told me and get their feedback.) These are some of my thoughts on what you told me. Please let me know if I misinterpreted anything.

Once the study is complete, I will have a copy of the results available through the Senior Center and on my study page on Facebook. Please contact me if you have any questions.

**After the meeting:**

1. The researcher will write up immediate impressions and summary.
2. The recording will be transcribed through NVivo software.
3. The researcher will analyze summaries, pull out primary and secondary codes, and develop category.
4. The researcher will look for emotional responses and tones to figure out priority codes.
5. The researcher will analyze codes and themes to interpret results.
6. The results will be developed into a report which will be made available at the senior center as well as online.

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Forms

### **Informed Consent**

(For Participating Seniors)

You are invited to take part in a research study about why some seniors visit senior centers and why others do not. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 12 volunteers who are:

- 60 years old and older
- Who currently participate in a senior center

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Dr. Michelle Fontaine, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

#### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to learn why some seniors visit senior centers and why others do not.

#### **Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- To take part in a confidential, audio recorded interview (1 to 1 ½ hours)
- At the end of the interview, you will be asked to confirm that the researcher has accurately interpreted your view point (ten minutes)

Here are some sample questions:

- How does the Senior Center fit your physical needs?
- How does the Senior Center fit your social needs?
- What attracted you to the Senior Center?

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. No one at the Seniors Center will treat you differently based on whether you volunteer or not.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by learning why some seniors participate in senior centers and others do not. By identifying strengths and challenges to attending senior centers which will help increase participation in senior centers. This in turn will help seniors in rural areas increase socialization and decrease isolation helping them to age well in place. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by giving recommendations to the Senior Center, as well as, posting results on the study's Facebook page which will be emailed to you at the completion of the study.

**Payment:**

There is no payment for volunteering to be interviewed for this study.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare)."

The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by password protection, use of codes in place of names, storing names (when necessary) separately from the data, and discarding names (when possible). Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You can ask questions of the researcher by emailing me at xxx. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at xxx. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here**. It expires on **IRB will enter expiration date**.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

## **Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email using the words “I consent”.

(For Non-Participating Seniors)

You are invited to take part in a research study about why some seniors visit senior centers and why others do not. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 12 volunteers who are:

- 60 years old and older
- Who do not currently participate in a senior center

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Dr. Michelle Fontaine, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to learn why some seniors visit senior centers and why others do not.

### **Procedures:**

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- To take part in a confidential, audio recorded interview (1 to 1 ½ hours)
- At the end of the interview, you will be asked to confirm that the researcher has accurately interpreted your view point (ten minutes)

Here are some sample questions:

- What are your impressions of senior centers?

- What are your reasons for not participating at a senior center?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by learning why some seniors participate in senior centers and others do not. By identifying strengths and challenges to attending senior centers which will help increase participation in senior centers. This in turn will help seniors in rural areas increase socialization and decrease isolation helping them to age well in place. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by giving recommendations to the Senior Center, as well as, posting results on the study's Facebook page which will be emailed to you at the completion of the study.

**Payment:**

There is no payment for volunteering to be interviewed for this study.

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare)."

The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by password protection, use of codes in place of names, storing names (when necessary) separately from the data, and discarding names (when possible). Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**



You can ask questions of the researcher by emailing me at xxx If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at xxx Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here**. It expires on **IRB will enter expiration date**.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

### **Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email using the words "I consent".

## Appendix C: Document Review Protocols

### **Documents to be reviewed:**

Flyers: One page information sheet left at town hall, churches, and local bulletin boards available for people to take when visiting in person

Organization Facebook Page and Metrics: An interactive community service page on the Facebook platform which is available for everyone using Facebook

Emails: Monthly calendar and announcements are sent via email to participants and some nonparticipants

Policies: Policies and procedures which govern the nonprofit organization

### **Review Process:**

#### 1. Flyer Review

- a. Clear goal: Does this document state the goal clearly?
- b. Eye catching: Is the font type and size eye catching? Does it have a popping headline to peak interest?
- c. Message: Does it call people to action? Does it use action words?
- d. Graphics and Pictures: are the images eye catching? Are they related to the content?
- e. Contact information: Is there more than one way to contact the organization? Is the contact information clear and inviting?
- f. Target Audience: Is the document written for the target audience?
- g. Consistency: Does the information in the document match other documents consistently?
- h. Information: Is the information complete? Is it too sparse?

#### 2. Facebook Page Review

- a. Clear goal: Does this document state the goal clearly?
- b. Eye catching: Is the font type and size eye catching? Does it have a popping headline to peak interest?
- c. Message: Does it call people to action? Does it use action words?
- d. Graphics and Pictures: are the images eye catching? Are they related to the content?
- e. Contact information: Is there more than one way to contact the organization? Is the contact information clear and inviting?
- f. Target Audience: Is the document written for the target audience?
- g. Consistency: Does the information in the document match other documents consistently?
- h. Information: Is the information complete? Is it too sparse?

- i. Fresh: Is the information updated regularly?
  - j. Interaction: Does it show community interaction?
3. Email Material Review
- a. Themes: What are the themes of the emails?
  - b. Information: Is the information clearly stated?
  - c. Message: Does it call people to action? Does it use action words?
  - d. Graphics and Pictures: are the images eye catching? Are they related to the content?
  - e. Contact information: Is there more than one way to contact the organization? Is the contact information clear and inviting?
  - f. Target Audience: Is the document written for the target audience?
  - g. Consistency: Does the information in the document match other documents consistently?
  - h. Information: Is the information complete? Is it too sparse? Is there too much to weed through?
  - i. Timing: How often are emails sent? Are they sent in time to make plans around activities?
4. Policy Review
- a. Effect: Is the desired effect clear in the policy?
  - b. Intention: Is the intention of the policy clear?
  - c. Implementation: Are the policies being implemented as required?
  - d. Completeness: Are there enough policies? Do they seem complete? Do they protect participants? Are there any policies which cover activities, marketing, or participation?

## Appendix D: Participation Invite

Looking for individuals 60 years old and older  
to participate in an interview...

I would like to invite you to be interviewed about senior centers. The interview should last no longer than one and a half hours. This research study is being conducted by Dr. Michelle Fontaine, a Public Administration Doctorate student at Walden University.

I am looking for people who want to take part in this research study and who are 60 years old and older. Your views will be used to help me in determining what activities are of interest to individuals 60 and older. I will also be interested in any barriers or challenges to attending activities at a center as well as your general thoughts and perceptions about senior centers.

Research studies are done to answer a question and participation is always optional. You will not be paid for your participation. There will be a consent form emailed to you prior to your interview. The interview will be recorded.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please contact Dr. Michelle Fontaine at xxx.

Thank you for your time.

Dr. Michelle Fontaine

## Appendix E: Recommendations

### Recommendations Bullet Points

#### Physical Facility

- Things that work well
  - Big Parking Lot
  - Ramp and stairs to building
  - Wide doorways
  - Round tables
  - Large meeting space
  - Private library for smaller meetings
- Future Thoughts
  - Find a place with 2 restrooms.
  - Find a place with a fully functioning kitchen.
- Oven Concerns
  - Speak to facility owner about oven concerns and dangers.
- Echoing Issue
  - Get noise cancelling curtains.
  - Get area rugs for under tables.
  - Get gaming mats for tables.
  - Get felt lined dice bowls.
  - Use a fabric covered room divider.
- Signage
  - Put a welcoming and visible sign on the door leading into the meeting area.

#### Activities

- Things that work well
  - Game Day
  - Crafts
  - Socialization Time
- Requests
  - More speakers on topics to help age in place well.
    - Nutrition
    - Financial
    - Medical
    - Mental Health
  - More speakers sharing interests.
    - History
    - Birds

- Plants
- Travel
- Intellectual discussions
- Meals
  - More potlucks
  - More Picnics
- Other Activities
  - More Day Trips
  - Some Evening Activities
    - Meals
    - Bingo
    - Book Club
    - Facilitated Discussions

### **Organizational Policies**

- Clarification
  - Clear Expectations and Rules posted at the front table.
  - Clear policies on who may attend posted on all social media pages.
  - Standard Operating Procedures manual for staff and Board of Directors to follow.
    - safety procedures
    - general rules,
    - maintenance of the facility
    - how each process should be carried out and by whom
  - By-Laws should include the duties of each Board Member clearly defined.

### **Social Media/Advertising**

- Branding
  - Everything should have the logo on it
    - Facebook Page
    - Emails
    - Calendars
    - Newsletters
    - Mailers
    - Flyers
  - Make sure things give a consistent message
    - A good tagline sums up what the Center is
  - Contact information on everything
- Keep Things Clean and Clear
  - Make fonts consistent and clean

- Don't over load with too much information
- Don't give too little information
- Use an Omnichannel approach to advertising
  - Facebook
  - Mailers
  - Flyers
  - Co-sponsor events with other community organization
    - Town Rec Department
    - Senior Facilities/Homes
    - Nonprofit Organizations
    - Community Programs
  - Outreach Campaign
    - Flyers in grocery bags
    - Mailers sent to all town residences
    - Flyers/Brochures placed in strategic locations
    - Speak to town employees about possible isolated individuals
    - Let local family physicians know about the Center so they may direct individuals to the center

### **Transportation**

- While it is not financially feasible for the center to have a van to transport individuals to the center activities, individuals may give rides to others as they see fit. This is not something the Center can advertise; however individuals can offer rides to friends old and new.