

## Positive Peer Pressure Equals Better Seniors' Health

No one disputes the benefits of balanced diet and exercise, but as many who have joined a gym with the best of intentions know, half the battle is keeping motivated and on track. The Westend Seniors Activity Centre in Edmonton understands that a healthy lifestyle pays dividends for everyone – especially older adults. The challenge comes in providing a program tailored specifically for seniors and ensuring consistent levels of participation.

In 2014, with Innovation Fund support from the Network of Excellence in Seniors' Health and Wellness, the Westend Seniors Activity Centre launched a project to train, motivate and support a cohort of seniors for improved fitness levels and function. The goals were to affordably improve the fitness knowledge and function of a diverse group of seniors, and have them motivate other seniors to follow the same path of health and wellness.

"A fitness trainer who is not trained in serving seniors may not understand their unique needs and might design a fitness program that is unattainable," said Janice Monfries, Executive Director, Westend Seniors Activity Centre. "Adding a trained (senior) peer leader to this program, helps them feel more comfortable, and also serves as a resource person, a mentor, even friend."

"I'm an 80 year old man and before starting this program I was dizzy and falling down, all of the time, even with my walker," said Bill, one of the seniors who completed both the fitness program and peer support volunteer training. "Now I'm more flexible and have much greater strength thanks to this wonderful program. I'm able to help people all of the time and my walker – which I used to use constantly before this course – I don't use at all anymore."

The number of seniors benefiting from the project has been increasing steadily. Usage of the centre's fitness room and uptake on its programs jumped from 51 people per month to 200 people per month in the first six months. A partnership with the University of Alberta enhanced the offering by having physical education students actively helping seniors to design and implement an eight-week customized fitness program. These students expanded their knowledge of seniors' needs, and their understanding of the importance of specialized senior-focused fitness regimes.

In addition to providing a reasonably priced personal training program, the centre stresses the importance of a balanced diet for seniors in a variety of creative ways. Nutritional tips are incorporated into the monthly newsletter; cooks and chefs are invited in to teach cooking classes with an emphasis on convenient but healthy meals; Primary Care Network dietitians offer nutritional workshops; and The Community Café has turned into a hub that enhances seniors' nutritional awareness and gives them an opportunity to share healthy and affordable meals.

"Proper nutrition is a must for everyone, and is a critical part of an effective self-care regimen for seniors," said Audrey Renaud, Nutritionist. "Learning to make nutritious food choices leads to better weight control, can prevent or help control the effects of some chronic diseases like Type 2 diabetes, and provides individuals with more energy. Together with the fitness program, it promotes an overall sense of well-being and leads to a better quality of life."

Most importantly, a new model for seniors' health and wellness has been created, and could be implemented at other seniors' centres in Alberta and throughout the country. Older adults, who are physically active, nutritionally aware and socially integrated through peer-supported programs like this, are better poised to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives in the community.

For more information on the Peer Trainer program contact Janice Monfries, Executive Director of the Westend Seniors Activity Centre, at 780-483-1209 ([execdirector@westendseniors.com](mailto:execdirector@westendseniors.com))