



## Promoting Physical, Mental, and Social Well-Being for Isolated Older Adults in Rural Colorado

Aging Well program helps residents remain at home as they age

### SUMMARY

Between 2008 and 2012, the [Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association](#) in Steamboat Springs developed Aging Well, a program to help improve the health and well-being of adults age 50 and older in rural Routt and Moffat counties. The program aimed to enhance the physical, mental, and social health of elderly residents so they could remain at home and in their communities as they aged.

The Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association, founded in 1964 to improve quality of life for all Northwest Colorado residents, provides programs in public health, home health, hospice and palliative care, primary care, and wellness and prevention to address health needs from the prenatal period through the end-of-life.

The project was part of the *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Local Funding Partnerships* national program. See [Special Report](#) for more information about the program.

### Key Results

- Aging Well program provided workshops, classes, and clinics for older adults during the four-year grant. These included once-a-week interactive wellness sessions; fitness and exercise classes; senior wellness clinics for blood pressure checks, weight monitoring, and blood glucose readings; foot care clinics; and chronic disease self-management workshops.
- A total of 1,868 individuals participated for a combined total of 39,066 times in these Aging Well programs.
- Of the 87 participants who completed a questionnaire about the program's impact, 86 percent reported improved health status; 76 percent reported begin able to do more activities they enjoyed; and 68 percent reported a decrease in pain.

## Funding

RWJF supported this project through a \$500,000 grant under its *RWJF Local Funding Partnerships* national program.

## CONTEXT

Routt and Moffat counties in northwest Colorado have a combined size close to that of Connecticut, but with far fewer people and much more open space. The number of people in the two counties in 2005 was 35,250—which residents often claim is less than the number of resident elk. The towns are few and small (Steamboat Springs, with 12,000 people, is the largest), and they are separated by expanses of rugged country where ranching and seasonal tourism comprise the main sources of income.

In both counties, the percentage of older residents is growing. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of people 55 to 64 grew by 62 percent in Routt County and by nearly 31 percent in Moffat County.

For people in rural areas, a range of factors complicates the typical challenges of staying healthy while aging, according to project director Donna Hackley, MPA, director of wellness and aging services at Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association.

“People who are growing older in rural communities really do face different challenges than people growing old in urban communities,” says Hackley. “A whole range of factors come into play, such as the unavailability of basic transportation, social isolation, few cultural and social services, lack of access to medical care, and inadequate housing.”

Studies have shown that wellness programs focusing on exercise, nutrition, chronic disease management, and social support can help older adults remain safe and independent in their own homes. Although wellness programs such as those run by PACE (the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly<sup>1</sup>) already exist for older adults in urban communities, there are few community-based models available for improving the health of older adults in rural areas.

The Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association began designing such a program in 2005. In August 2005, the association leaders hosted a conference in Steamboat Springs and invited national experts on aging and community-based health programs to review

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<sup>1</sup> The Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) model is centered around the belief that it is better for the well-being of seniors with chronic care needs and their families to be served in the community whenever possible. It serves individuals who are age 55 or older, certified by their state to need nursing home care, are able to live safely in the community at the time of enrollment, and live in a [typically urban] PACE service area. RWJF was an early funder of PACE. A \$6.6 million program, *OnLok Approach to Care for the Elderly* (March 1987 to February 1991), developed as an outgrowth of earlier grants to On Lok Senior Health Services to develop and test the feasibility of replicating its PACE model program for long-term care for the elderly.

options for aging adults in rural communities. Based chiefly on these discussions, the association identified two key components that would help create a wellness program for aging adults in rural areas:

- Wellness classes would be distributed among small, rural towns, providing convenient access to more remote residents.
- Seniors would enroll in the wellness classes before their health deteriorated and before becoming eligible for nursing homes, a move that would hopefully delay the onset of frailty and keep aging adults safely in their homes and communities.

After the conference, the association conducted household surveys and focus groups with potential participants in the two counties. These activities helped determine what the program would offer, program locations, and recruitment strategies.

### **RWJF's Interest in This Area**

RWJF has done considerable funding in the area of long-term care, independent living, and health and wellness for older adults. See the following resources for more information:

- *Cash & Counseling*. This program expanded a proven model of consumer-directed supportive services to more states, allowing thousands more older adults and people with disabilities to have choice and control over the care they receive.
- *Community Partnership for Older Adults*. See [Program Results Report](#).
- *Home Care Research Initiative*. See [Program Results Report](#).
- *Independent Choices: Enhancing Consumer Direction for Persons with Disabilities*. See [Program Results Report](#).
- *Partners in Caregiving: The Dementia Services Program*. See [Program Results Report](#).
- *Active for Life: Increasing Physical Activity Levels in Adults Age 50 and Older*. See the [Program Results Report](#).

## **THE PROJECT**

### **Aging Well**

The Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association created the Aging Well program for older adults in Routt and Moffat counties. The program addressed the mental and physical health needs of these residents, while working to increase the social and civic

connections for those most vulnerable to the isolation of rural frontier life. Specifically, Aging Well:

- Expanded the aging services infrastructure in the two counties to address the needs of elders and their caregivers in the counties' rural areas
- Created evidence-based practices and programs to improve health in older adults and to help them age in place
- Developed community-based partnerships to provide opportunities for mental and physical activities, along with social and intellectual stimulation for aging adults

## Funding

From July 2008 through March 2012, RWJF funded the Aging Well program with a \$500,000 grant,<sup>2</sup> through its *Local Funding Partnerships* national program,<sup>3</sup> which provides matching grants for innovative community-based projects aimed at improving the health and health care of underserved and vulnerable populations. See the [Special Report](#) for more information on the program and links to reports on other projects.

## Other Funding

Additional funders provided more than \$1 million for the project; these included the Daniels Fund, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Colorado Health Foundation, and Colorado Trust.

## RESULTS

The project team reported the following results to RWJF:

- **Aging Well provided workshops, classes, and clinics for older adults during the four-year grant.**
  - *Wellness Day workshops*. These once-a-week interactive sessions (also called Wellness Wednesdays) typically run for six hours and offer:
    - Fitness and exercise classes
    - Senior Wellness Clinics and Foot Care Clinics
    - Healthy group meals
    - Life-long learning classes in art, writing, memoirs, and other topics

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<sup>2</sup> ID #64602

- Community presentations and health education programs
- Social interaction and community engagement

The project team recruited program participants by advertising in local newspapers, placing banners throughout the communities, and encouraging referrals from partnering clinics. By the end of the grant, Wellness Day was established in the towns of Craig, Hayden, and Oak Creek, with over 80 participants each week.

*“My wife has lost 50 to 60 pounds since we started coming here,” says Butch Cook, who started attending Wellness Day workshops in Craig with his wife Leslie in 2008. “I think part of that is due to what we’ve learned about healthy eating. It has been a real lifestyle change for us, and our diet has really improved. We are eating much more chicken and less red meat, and a lot more fruits and vegetables.”*

*For more about the Cooks’ experience, read their story.*

For more about the Wellness Day workshops, view the video posted [online](#).

— ***Fitness and exercise classes, offered during Wellness Day workshops and as stand-only events in the rural communities.*** These Aging Well classes reflected the following established fitness programs:

- Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program
- Arthritis Foundation Aquatics
- Tai Chi for Health
- N’Balance Fall Prevention Program
- Arthritis Foundation Walk with Ease

By the end of the grant, the fitness and exercise classes were offered in the Colorado towns of Yampa, Craig, Hayden, Oak Creek, and Steamboat Springs.

*“We don’t have many opportunities to take fitness classes out here, with all the gravel roads and such,” says Louise Iacovetto, who travels from her home in Phippsburg to participate in Aging Well fitness classes in Oak Creek. “And then when winter comes, the roads can get pretty dangerous with all the deep snow. So to be able to drive a few miles north to Oak Creek on the highway is a real lifesaver for me.”*

*For more about Iacovetto’s experience, read her story.*

- *Senior Wellness Clinics, offering blood pressure checks, weight monitoring, blood glucose readings, immunizations, and medication reviews.* The association’s registered nurses delivered these services at Wellness Days, in other community locations (e.g., community centers and town halls), and by appointment at the association’s clinics.
- *Foot care clinics, offering foot inspections, toenail trims, and massages.* Older adults took part in foot care clinics offered at Wellness Day workshops, in other community locations, and by appointment.
- *Chronic disease self-management workshops.* These workshops, based on Stanford University’s Healthier Living with Chronic Conditions program, offer advice on such things as dealing with pain and isolation, appropriate exercise, and medication. The association also offered a version of the workshop for Spanish speakers.
- **Some 1,868 individual participated for a combined total of 39,066 times in these Aging Well programs during the four-year grant.** Attendance in workshops and clinics increased 84 percent between 2008 and 2012. Sixty-nine percent of the participants were over age 60, and 21 percent were 59 or younger (10% did not report age). Seventy-seven percent were female and 33 percent male.
- **Of the 87 participants who completed a questionnaire about the program’s impact, 86 percent reported improved health status, and 76 reported being able to do more activities they enjoyed.** In addition:
  - 68 percent reported a decrease in pain.
  - 47 percent reported fewer doctor visits.
  - 14 percent reported lower medication use.
- **The project team developed new partnerships to increase the number of participants, program sites, and offerings.** These community partnerships ranged from local community colleges to local councils on aging. Examples of partners and their contributions to the program include:
  - Local health care clinics referred patients to the program.
  - Horizons, a community-based organization located in northwest Colorado that serves individuals with developmental disabilities, referred 20 participants to Aging Well classes, offered in the three communities.
  - Journey Baptist Church in Craig provided space for Aging Well programs and services several days during the week.
  - The Craig campus of the Colorado Northwestern Community College offered adult education courses and travel opportunities to participants at reduced rates.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Carefully evaluate partnerships and cultivate those that will best serve your programs and target audience.** As the project team learned, valuable partners may not be the largest. For example, one such partner was a local coffee shop, an old cowboy cafe in Yampa (pop. 427). “Sometimes the furnace was broken,” said Hackley. “But the café is a bedrock of the town, and that’s where the local folks wanted to meet. They just kept their coats and boots on while they exercised.”

## AFTERWARD

In 2010, the Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association received a one-time \$40,000 RWJF grant designed to help maintain services to vulnerable populations during the economic downturn that began in 2008. The association was able to keep staffing levels sufficient to meet community need, and avoided limiting the numbers of older adults they were able to serve. In fact, Aging Well attendance increased by 10 percent during this period.

With funding from the Colorado Health Foundation, United Way organizations in both counties, donations from the local community, and optional small payments from participants, the Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association continued in 2013 to offer the Aging Well program. The project team is also working to develop a database tracking system and continues to find new ways to share success stories.

## BUTCH AND LESLIE COOK AND THE AGING WELL PROGRAM

### How a Health Promotion Program Helped a Rural Colorado Couple

Butch Cook, 68, of Craig, Colo., retired in 2008 after owning an excavating company for 13 years. “It’s the only job I know where you start on top and work your way down,” he likes to joke.

Shortly after he retired, Cook and his wife Leslie who had lived in Craig for 36 years, began playing cards at the local Lions Club. “But one day my wife said, ‘You know, we need the exercise,’” he says. They soon discovered Aging Well, a program run by the Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association. “So we went down and looked at the program, and we really enjoyed it. There are about 30 people in the program, which meets once a week. It’s just a fun time—nice people, good exercise, interesting presentations, and lunch!”

### *A Workshop Changes A Lot*

The Wellness Day workshop sessions, held at a local church, begin mid-morning with an hour of exercise. Registered nurses provide individual consultations and measure the



weight and blood pressure of the participants, who then have lunch and enjoy a presentation, followed by opportunities for playing cards and socializing. Presentations range from discussions on health and finance to craft classes and even an occasional game of bingo.

Another Wellness Day feature that Cook appreciates is its rewards system for healthy behaviors. “They have rewards for losing weight, little things like a check for \$15 or a coupon that you can redeem with a purchase at a local store. But it inspires a lot of the folks here, men and women alike, to drop some pounds.

“My wife has lost 50 to 60 pounds since we started coming here. I think part of that is due to what we’ve learned about healthy eating. It has been a real lifestyle change for us, and our diet has really improved. We are eating much more chicken and less red meat, and a lot more fruits and vegetables.”

The Aging Well program was free when the Cooks started, but the program now requests a \$3 donation for lunch and for each fitness class. “It would be nice if we didn’t have to pay,” says Cook, “but right now we’re happy to give what we can. We’d be at a real loss without this program.”

## **FINDING A NEARBY FITNESS CLASS MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE**

### **Louise Iacovetto, 88, of Phippsburg, Pop. 204, Keeps Limber**

Louise Iacovetto, 88, was born and raised in the little town of Phippsburg, Colo. (pop. 204), just east of the picturesque and rugged Flat Top mountains. “I’ve been in the same house for 66 years,” she says. “My husband Ray and I ran the post office here in Phippsburg from ‘49 to ‘89. Ray was the postmaster—one of the last postmasters to be presidentially appointed, as they used to do back in those days. It was President Truman who appointed him.”

The Iacovettos used to go to once-a-week luncheons sponsored by the Council on Aging, up the road in Oak Creek. But after her husband passed away in 2006, Iacovetto heard about the classes and workshops offered in Oak Creek by the Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association. She decided to give them a try.

“We don’t have many opportunities to take fitness classes out here, with all the gravel roads and such,” she says. “And then when winter comes, the roads can get pretty dangerous with all the deep snow. So to be able to drive a few miles north to Oak Creek on the highway is a real lifesaver for me.”

Iacovetto takes both of the Aging Well fitness classes offered in Oak Creek each week. One focuses on movement for arthritis, and the other is Tai Chi. Both are led by trained and certified instructors; a \$3 donation is requested for the classes, but due to fixed



incomes and other circumstances, not everyone is able to pay. Once the exercise class is completed, Iacovetto enjoys lunch and more opportunities for socializing. Occasionally, someone from the community or a local organization gives a presentation. “Like just last week,” she says, “a fellow from town gave a presentation about the years he spent in Africa working for the Peace Corps.”

Iacovetto appreciates Aging Well. “At 88, I would not be healthy if it weren’t for this program. My fingers normally would hurt because of arthritis, but because of these classes I can keep them limber. I could do the exercises at home by myself, but you know how that goes...It’s much easier to exercise when you’re in a group. It gives you the initiative to get started and keep going. And if I was at home, sitting all day in the recliner, my back would hurt and pretty soon I wouldn’t be breathing well. So to me the Aging Well program is really invaluable and I sure would hate to lose it.”

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### **Communications or Promotions**

“VNA Wellness Wednesdays.” Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association, <https://youtu.be/uizpw2gPta8>.