

Opportunities Abound When Mixing Generations!

This article is part of an on-going series highlighting innovative and promising practices that promote healthy aging. To learn more about how to make your community more aging-friendly, please see our publication, "A Healthy Community Perspective on Aging Well," available at www.civicpartnerships.org.

The City of Indio, located in Riverside County, has a total population of 83,937. The city is one of the fastest growing in the nation, with a population increase of nearly 60% from 2000 to 2007 (U.S. Census). Indio is ethnically diverse with community members self-identifying as 75% Hispanic/Latino, 19% White, and over 42% as "other races."

Lifelong learning is an important avenue for older people to remain intellectually active and socially engaged. Very often, cities fail to capitalize on potential opportunities to meet the needs of both younger and older community members through programming that offers both learning opportunities and constructive, social interaction.

A recent report published by the American Education Council and MetLife Foundation (2008) discussing higher education and older adults noted, "lifelong learning at the right time and in the right amount of time can foster critical forms of mobility... across workplaces, communities and generations."

Indio is creating an intergenerational campus with facilities such as the Senior and Teen Centers, Library, High School and Elementary schools, all located within walking distance from each other. The city pooled resources in order to bring together facilities to create opportunities for learning across generations.

City Manager Glenn Southard recalled the great similarity of ideas expressed

by teens and older adults during the planning process, "Both groups expressed interest in center sponsored educational events and outings. We took the time to think it through and involved everyone in the community in the process."

In anticipation of the future activities planned for the intergenerational campus, the Indio Human Services staff initiated a program targeting older adults and teenagers that began with a bus trip to a nearby theatrical production. During the activity, Human Services (Senior Services) Supervisor Michael Moreland observed, "They didn't interact. No one talked to each other." Prior to the next outing, city staff planned ahead to ensure interaction among participants.

In advance of the trip, staff members spoke, in separate meetings, with the two age groups about the special opportunity afforded by the event. In addition, staff members established a seating arrangement on the bus that placed younger people next to older participants and provided "icebreaker" activities.




Hector Gutierrez, Jr. and Mary Lou Peggs waiting to board the bus in Indio.

The strategies and approaches to encouraging interaction and learning among the generations proved highly successful. Moreland noted that the program, "made for a better understanding and tolerance of each other's background and cultural history," among the predominately White older adults and younger Hispanic and Latino youth. The events

became so popular that staff had to institute sign-up sheets and a drawing to select participants. With increased demand, there was a modest increase in costs. Consequently, staff sought and received outside support from local Native American tribes and the Rotary Club.

Combining lifelong learning opportunities in an intergenerational setting is a win-win for everyone involved. Typical senior center events do not attract younger people. If teens do attend an event at the senior center, they do not meaningfully engage with older adults. Intergenerational activities are usually "one-way" in nature -- either the older adult is the "teacher" or "mentor" or the young person is the "friendly visitor." Indio has created a "level playing field" among the age groups.

Research on intergenerational learning (Loewen, 1996) revealed that "in the best programs, the lines between those served and those serving are blurred to the point of irrelevance." In this instance, because everyone is a student and a teacher, regardless of age, the learning environment is enhanced.

The life experience shared and support extended by older adults to younger people are invaluable and provide an additional circle of nurturing and guidance during challenging economic times for many communities. By using existing facilities and pooling resources, cities can stretch dollars and improve program efficiency. 

For more information contact:

Glenn Southard, City Manager
City of Indio
(760) 391-4015
Email: gsouthard@indio.org

Michael D. Moreland, Human Services Supervisor/Seniors
(760) 391-4170
Email: mmoreland@indio.org

